



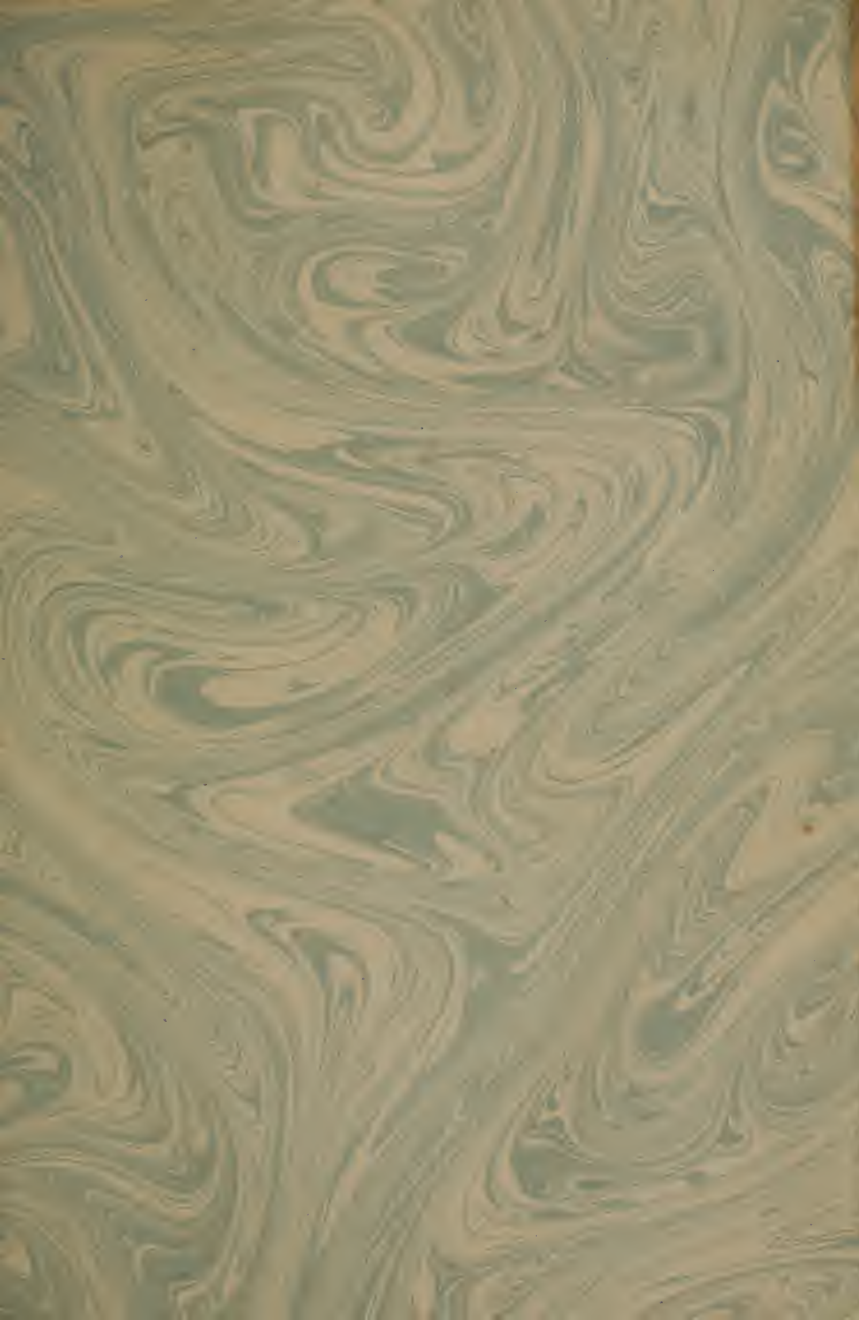


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THE LONE RANCHE.

A Tale of the 'Staked Plain.'

BY

CAPTAIN MAYNE REID,

AUTHOR OF 'THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE LONE RANCHE.



CHAPTER I.

A STREET SPECTACLE.

IN the city of Chihuahua, metropolis of the northern provinces of Mexico—for the most part built of mud—standing in the midst of vast treeless plains, o’ertopped by bold porphyritic mountains—plains with a population sparse as their timber—in the old city of Chihuahua, lies the first scene of our story.

Less than twenty thousand souls dwell within the walls of this North-Mexican metropolis, and in the country surrounding it a like limited number.

Once they were thicker on the soil; but the

tomahawk of the Comanche, and the spear of the Apache, have thinned off the descendants of the *conquistadores*, until country houses stand at wide distances apart, with more than an equal number of ruins between.

Yet this old town of Chihuahua challenges weird and wonderful memories. At the mention of its name springs up a host of strange records, the souvenirs of a frontier-life altogether different from that wreathed round the history of the Anglo-American borderland. It recalls the monk with his cross, and the soldier close following with his sword; the old mission-house, with its church and a *presidio* beside it; the fierce savage lured from a roving life, and turned into a toiling *peon*; afterward to revolt against a system of slavery that even religion failed to make enduring; the neophyte turning his hand against his cowed teacher, equally his oppressor; revolt followed by a flow of red blood, with ruinous devastation, until the old walls of both mission and *presidio* are left tenantless, and the redskin has returned to his roving.

Such a history has had the town of Chihuahua,

and the settlements in its neighbourhood. Nor is the latter portion of it all a record of the olden time. Much of it belongs to modern days, and similar scenes are transpiring even now. But a few years ago, a stranger entering its gates would have seen nailed overhead, and whisked to and fro by the wind, some scores of objects similar to one another, and resembling tufts or tresses of hair. This was long, trailing, and black, as if taken from the manes or tails of horses. But it came not thence: it was human hair, and the patches of skin that served to keep the bunches together had been stripped from human skulls. They were scalps—the scalps of Indians; showing that the Comanches and Apaches had not had it all their own way.

Beside them could be seen other clavated objects of auricle shape, set in rows or circles like a festooning of capsicums strung up for desiccation. No doubt they had drawn tears from the eyes of those whose heads had furnished them, for they were *human ears!*

These ghastly souvenirs were the *bounty war-*

rants of a band whose deeds have been already chronicled by this pen. They were the trophies of the 'SCALP-HUNTERS'!

They were there less than a quarter of a century ago, waving in the dry wind that sweeps over the plains of Chihuahua. For aught the writer knows, they may be there still; or if not the same, others replacing or supplementing them, of like gory record.

It is not with the 'Scalp-Hunters' we have now to do—only with the city of Chihuahua. And not much with it either. A single scene occurring in its streets is all of Chihuahuense life to be depicted in this tale.

It was the spectacle of a religious procession—a thing far from uncommon in Chihuahua, or any other Mexican town; so common indeed, that at least weekly the like may be witnessed. This was one of the grandest—representing the story of the Crucifixion. Citizens of all classes assisted at the ceremony, the soldiery also taking part in it. The *padres* of course, both secular and regular, were its chief supports and propagators. To them it

brought bread, and if not butter—since there is none in Chihuahua—it added to their incomes and influence. There were the usual characters in disguise: an image of the Redeemer conducted to the place of the Passion; the cross borne on the shoulders of a brawny brown-skinned Simon; Pilate the oppressor, Judas the betrayer—in short, every prominent personage spoken of in Holy Writ as having been present on that occasion when the Son of Man suffered for our sins.

There is, or was then, an American hotel in Chihuahua, or at least one approaching the American fashion. It was only a mere *posada*. Among its guests was a stranger, alike to the town as the country. His dress, figure, and facial appearance bespoke him an American, and by the same tokens it could be told that he belonged to the Southern States—at all events those that lie west of the Alleghanies. He was in truth a Kentuckian; but so far from representing the type, rough and stalwart, usually associated with the idea of ‘Old Kaintuck,’ he was a man of fair medium size, with a build comparable to that of the Belvidere Apollo.

His was a figure tersely set, with limbs well knitted; a handsome face and features of amiable cast, at the same time expressing confidence and courage. A costly Guayaquil hat upon his head, and coat to correspond, bespoke him respectable; his *tout-ensemble* proclaimed him a man of leisure—his air and bearing were unmistakable: they could only belong to a gentleman.

Why he was in Chihuahua, or whence he had come to it, no one seemed to know or inquire. Enough that he was there, and gazing at the spectacular procession as it filed past the *posada*.

He was regarding it with no eye of wonderment. In all likelihood he had seen such before. He could not have travelled far through Mexico without witnessing some ceremony of a similar kind.

Whether interested in this one or no, he was soon notified that he was not regarding it in the manner proper or customary to the country. Standing half behind one of the *portales* of the *posada*, he had not thought it necessary to take off his hat. Perhaps placed in a more conspi-

cuous position, he would have done this. He was not the sort of man to seek notoriety by an exhibition of bravado ; and though a Protestant of a most liberal creed, he would have shrunk from offending the slightest sensibilities of any one belonging to an opposite faith—even the most bigoted Catholic of that bigoted land. That his ‘guayaquil’ still remained upon his head arose, at first, from simple forgetfulness that it was there. Standing inside the portico, and particularly screened by one of the pillars, it had not occurred to him to uncover.

He now saw scowling looks, and heard low growlings from the crowd as it swayed slowly past. He knew enough to be conscious of what these meant; but he felt at the same time disinclined to humiliate himself by a too facile compliance. A proud American, in the midst of a people he had long ago learnt to despise—their idolatrous observances along with them—no wonder he should feel a little defiant and a good deal exasperated. Enough yielding, he thought, to withdraw farther back behind the pillar—which he did.

It was too late. The keen eye of a fanatic had been upon him—one who appeared to have authority for meting out chastisement. An officer, bearded and grandly bedizened, riding at the head of a troop of lancers, quickly wrenched his horse from the line of march, and spurred him towards the porch of the posada. In another instant his bared blade was waving over the hatted head of the Kentuckian.

‘Gringo! alto el sombrero! Abajo! a sus rodillas.’ (Off with your hat, greenhorn! Down upon your knees!) were the words that came hissing from between the moustached lips of the lancer.

As they failed to bring compliance, they were instantly followed by a blow from the blade of the sabre. It was struck sideways, but with sufficient sleight and force to send the Panama hat whirling to the pavement, and its wearer reeling against the wall.

It was but the stagger of a sudden and little-expected surprise. In another instant the ‘gringo’ had drawn a revolving pistol, and in yet another its bullet would have been through the brain of

the swaggering aggressor, when a man, rushing from behind, laid hold of the Kentuckian's arm and restrained him from firing.

At first he thought it was the act of a second enemy; but in a moment he knew it to be the behaviour of a friend—at least a pacificator resolved upon seeing fair play.

‘You are wrong, Captain Uraga,’ interposed he who had intermeddled, addressing himself to the lancer. ‘This gentleman is a stranger in the country, and not acquainted with our customs.’

‘A heretic, then. It is time he should be taught them, and at the same time respect for the true Church. What right, Colonel Miranda, have you to interfere?’

‘The right, first of humanity, second of hospitality, and third that I am your superior officer.’

‘Bah! You mistake yourself. Remember, señor, you are not in your own district. If it was in New Mexico, I might take commands from you. This is Chihuahua.’

‘Chihuahua or not, you shall be made answer-

able for this outrage. Don't imagine, cavallero, that your patron, Santa Anna, is now President of the Republic, with power to indorse such conduct as yours. You seem to forget, Captain Uraga, that you carry your commission under a new *régime*—one that holds itself responsible not only to fixed laws, but to the code of decency—responsible also for international courtesy to the great Republic of which, I believe, this gentleman is a citizen.'

'Bah!' once more exclaimed the bedizened bully. 'Preach your *palabras* to ears that have time to listen to them. I sha'n't stop the procession for either you or your Yankee protégé. So you can both go to the devil.'

With this benevolent permission the captain of lancers struck the spurs into his horse, and once more placed himself at the head of his troop.

The crowd collected by this unpleasant episode soon scattered away—the sooner that the strange gentleman, along with his generous defender, at once disappeared from the portico by going inside the inn.

The procession was still passing, and its irre-

sistible attractions swept the loiterers along in its current—most of them soon forgetting a scene that in a land where ‘law secures not life’ is of too common occurrence to be long thought of or specially remembered.





CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

THE young Kentuckian was half-frenzied by the insult. The proud blood of his republican citizenship was boiling within his veins. What was he to do?

In the agony of his dilemma, he put the question to the gentleman, who had no doubt restrained him from committing manslaughter.

The latter was an entire stranger to him—never seen before. He was a man of less than thirty years of age, wearing a broad-brimmed hat upon his head, a jacket, slashed calzoneros, and red crape scarf—in short, the *ranchero* costume of the country. Still there was a military bearing about him, that corresponded to the title by which the lancer officer had addressed him.

‘Cavallero,’ he said in reply, ‘if your own safety be of any consequence to you, I should advise you to take no farther notice of the incident that has arisen.’

‘Pardon me, señor ; but not for all the world would I follow your advice—not for my life. I am an American—a Kentuckian. We do not take blows without giving something in return. I must seek redress.’

‘If you seek it by the law, I may as well tell you, that here you won’t have much chance of finding it.’

‘I know that. The law ! I did not think of such a thing. I am a gentleman ; I suppose this Captain Uraga pretends to be the same. He cannot refuse to give me the usual satisfaction.’

‘He may ; and very likely would, on the plea of your being a stranger—only a barbarian, a *Tejano*, as he would put it.’

‘Alone—a stranger—what am I to do ?’

‘Well, cavallero, if you are determined on a *desafio*, I think I might arrange it. I feel that I am myself a little compromised by my interference ;

and if you will accept of a stranger for your second, I think I can answer for it that he will not refuse me.'

'Colonel Miranda—your name, I believe—need I attempt to express my thanks for so much generosity? I cannot—I could not. You have removed the very difficulty that was troubling me; for I am not only a stranger to you, but to every one around me. I arrived in Chihuahua but yesterday, and do not know a soul in the place.'

'Enough; you shall not be disappointed in your duel for the want of a friend. As a preliminary, may I ask, if you have skill in the use of the sword?'

'Sufficient to risk my life upon it.'

'I put the question, because that is the weapon your adversary will be certain to choose. You being the challenger, of course he has the choice; and he will insist upon it, for a reason that may perhaps amuse you. It is, that we Mexican gentlemen believe you Americans somewhat *gauche* in the handling of the rapier, though we know you to be adepts in the use of the pistol. I know

Captain Gil Uruga to be as thorough a poltroon as ever wore epaulettes, but he will have to meet you on my account; and he would perhaps have done so anyhow—trusting to the probability of your not being a skilled swordsman.'

'In that, Colonel Miranda, he may perhaps find himself disappointed.'

'I am glad to hear it; and now it only needs to receive your directions. I am ready to act.'

*

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The directions were given; and within two hours' time, Captain Gil Uruga of the Zacatecas Lancers was in receipt of a challenge from the young American—Frank Hamersley by name—Colonel Miranda being its bearer.

With such a voucher the lancer captain could not do otherwise than accept; which he did with the more confidence for the very reason Miranda had made known. A 'Tejano,' was his reflection; what should he know of the sword?

And swords were the weapons chosen.

Had the Captain of Mexican Lancers been told that his Kentuckian adversary had spent a portion

of his life among the Creoles of New Orleans, he would have had less trust in the chances likely to favour him. They did not favour him at all.

We need not describe the duel, which, if it differed from other encounters of like kind, it was by being on both sides bitter, and of deadly intent. Suffice it to say, that the young Kentuckian displayed a skill in swordsmanship sufficient to disarrange several of Gil Uraga's front teeth, and make an ugly gash in his cheek. The lancer captain had left just enough command over his mouth to enable him to cry 'Basta!' and the affair was over.

* * * * *

'Señor Hamersley,' said the gentleman who had so effectively befriended him, after they had returned from the encounter, and were drinking a bottle of best *Paso* wine in the *posada*, 'may I ask where you are going from this place?'

'I intend going north—to Santa Fé in New Mexico; thence to the United States, along with one of the return caravans.'

'When do you purpose starting?'

‘As to that, I am not tied to time. The party with whom I am to cross the plains will not be leaving Santa Fé for six months to come. I can get there by a month’s travel, I suppose?’

‘Less than that. It is not a question of how soon you can get there, but when you may leave here. I advise you to start at once. I admit that two days is but a short time to see the sights of even so small a place as Chihuahua. But you have seen some of them; enough, I should say. If you take my advice, cavallero, you will let it content you, and kick the Chihuahua dust from your feet before another twenty-four hours passes over your head.’

‘But why, Colonel Miranda?’

‘Because as long as you remain here you will be in danger of losing your life. You don’t know the character of the man with whom you have crossed swords. I do. Although wearing the uniform of an officer in our army, he is simply a cut-throat and a robber. A coward, as I told you, too. He would never have met you, if he had thought I would have given him a chance

to get out of it. Perhaps he might have been tempted by the hopes of an easy conquest from your supposed want of skill. It would have given him something to boast about among the dames of Chihuahua ; for Captain Gil deems himself no little of a lady-killer. You have spoilt his physiognomy for life ; and depend upon it, as long as life lasts he will not be the man to forgive you. I have also come in for a share of his spite ; and it behoves both of us to beware of him.'

'But what could he do ?'

'Cavallero, that question shows you have not been very long in this country, and are yet ignorant of our customs. In Mexico we have some trades and callings not much known in your country. Know that poniards can here be purchased by the score, and the arms of assassins to use them. Do you understand me ?'

'I do. But how do you counsel me to act ?'

'As I intend doing myself—leave Chihuahua this very day. Our roads are the same as far as Albuquerque, when you will be out of reach of this little danger. I am returning thither from

the city of Mexico, where I've had business with the government. I have an escort; and if you choose to avail yourself of it, you are welcome to its protection.'

'Colonel Miranda, I say again, I know not how to thank you.'

'Reserve your thanks till I have done you some service, beyond the simple duty of a gentleman, who sees another gentleman and a stranger in difficulties he had no hand in creating. But enough, señor. We have no time to spend in talking. Even now there may be a dagger preparing for you. Get your things ready at once, as I start two hours before sunset. In this warm season of the year we do our best journeys in the cool of the evening.'

'I shall be ready.'

That same afternoon, two hours before the going down of the sun, a party of horsemen, wearing the uniform of Mexican dragoons of the line, issued from the *garita* of Chihuahua, and took the northern road leading to Santa Fé, by El Paso del Norte. Colonel Miranda, his ran-

chero dress changed for the fatigue uniform of a cavalry officer, rode at their head; and by his side the young American he had so generously and gallantly befriended.





CHAPTER III.

THE COLONEL-COMMANDANTE.

Six weeks have elapsed since the day of the duel at Chihuahua. Two men are standing on the *azotea* of a large and massive dwelling-house close to the town of Albuquerque, whose church-towers are just visible through the foliage of trees that shade and surround the dwelling. They are Colonel Miranda and his Kentuckian protégé.

The hospitality of the generous Mexican had not terminated with the journey from Chihuahua. After three weeks of toilsome travel, including the traverse of the famed 'Dead Man's Journey,' he was continuing to extend it in his own house and his own district, of which last he was military commandante. Albuquerque was at the time occupied by a considerable body of

troops, stationed there for defence against Indian incursions.

The house on which the two men stood was that in which Colonel Miranda had been born—the patrimonial mansion of a large estate that extended along the Rio del Norti, and back towards the Sierra Blanca mountains into territories unknown.

Besides being an officer in the Mexican army, Colonel Miranda was one of the *ricos* of the country. The house, as we have said, was a large massive mansion, having, like all Mexican dwellings of its class, a terraced roof or *azotea*. What is also common enough in that country, it was surmounted by a *mirador* or ‘belvidere.’ Standing less than half a mile distant from the soldier’s *cuartel*, the commandant found it convenient to make use of it as his head-quarters. A small guard in the *saguan* or covered gate-entrance below, and a sentry pacing in front, indicated this.

There was no family inside, wife, woman, or child; for the colonel, still a young man, was a bachelor. Only peons in the field, grooms and other servants around the stables, with domestics

in the dwelling—all, male and female, being Indians of the race known as ‘Pueblos’ or ‘mansos’—brown-skinned and obedient.

But there was no living lady to make her soft footsteps heard within the halls of Colonel Miranda’s mansion. There was the portrait of a lovely girl, that hung against the wall of the main *sala*, upon which his American guest had more than once gazed in silent admiration. It showed signs of having been recently painted; which was not strange, since it was the likeness of Colonel Miranda’s sister, some years younger than himself, scarce yet a woman—at the time on a visit to some relatives in a distant city of the republic.

The host and his guest upon the housetop were leisuring away the time in the indulgence of a cigar, watching the water-fowl that swam and plunged in the waters of the broad shallow stream—listening to the hoarse croakings of the pelicans and the shriller screams of the *gruya* cranes. It was the hour of evening, when the birds become especially strident.

‘And so you must go to-morrow, Señor Don

Francisco?' said his host, taking the cigarito from between his teeth, and looking inquiringly into the face of the American.

'There is no help for it, colonel. The prairie merchants with whom I came out will be leaving Santa Fé the day after to-morrow. There will be just time for me to get there. Unless along with them, there may be no opportunity for months to come, and one cannot cross the plains alone.'

'Well, I suppose I must lose you. I am sorry. I am somewhat lonely here. There's not one of my officers, with the exception of our old *medico*, exactly of the sort to be companionable. True, I have enough occupations, as you may have by this time discovered, in looking after our neighbours the *Indios bravos*, who, knowing the skeleton of a regiment I've got, are growing saucier every day. I only wish I had a score or two of your stalwart trappers, who now and then show themselves in our settlements. Well, my sister will soon be here, and she, brave girl, has plenty of life in her, though she is but young. What a romping creature she is; wild as a mustang filly fresh caught.

I wish, Don Francisco, you could have seen Adela. I am sure you would be delighted with her.'

If the portrait on the wall was anything of a faithful likeness, Hamersley could not have been otherwise than delighted with her. This was his reflection, though he did not in speech declare it.

'It is to be hoped we shall meet again, Colonel Miranda,' was his simple rejoinder. 'If I did not have this hope, I should now be parting from you with greater regret. Indeed I have more than a presentiment we shall meet again; for I have as good as made up my mind to a certain thing.'

'To what, Don Francisco?'

'To return to New Mexico.'

'And settle in the country?'

'Not exactly that; only for a time—long enough to enable me to dispose of a cargo of merchandise in exchange for a bag of your Mexican *dobloones*.'

'Ah! you intend to become one of the prairie merchants, then?'

'I do. That intention has been the cause of my present visit to your country. I am old enough

to think of some calling. I have always had a fancy for this adventurous life of the prairie traders; and as I have sufficient means to stock a small caravan for myself, I think now of trying it. My present trip has been one of experiment and exploration. I am satisfied with the result; and if no accident arise, you may see me on the Del Norte before either of us be twelve months older.'

'Then indeed is there a hope of our meeting again. I am rejoiced at it. But, Señor Don Francisco,' continued his host, changing to a serious tone, 'a word, lest I might forget it—a word of counsel, or warning I may call it. You are too unsuspicious, too regardless of danger. It does not all lie upon the prairies, or among the red-skinned savages. There is as much of it here, amid the abodes of our so-called civilisation. When you are travelling through this country, keep your late antagonist in mind; and should you at any time meet, beware of him. I have given you some hints about the character of Gil Uraga. I have not told you all. He is worse than you can ever imagine. I know him well. Do you see that

rancho standing out among the suburbs—a mere hovel it is?’

Hamersley nodded assent.

‘He was born there. His father was what we here call a *lepero* ; himself the same. He has left in his native place a record of crimes well known, with others still worse that we more than suspected. In short, he is, as I have told you, a robber. No doubt you wonder that such a man should be a captain of lancers. That is because you are ignorant of the state of our army—our society as well. It is but the result of constantly recurring changes in our political system. Still you may feel surprise at his holding this commission with the patriotic party—the pure one—in power, as it now is. That might be inexplicable even to myself, for I know that he will be traitor to our cause when convenient to him. But I know the explanation. There is a power, even when the party exercising it is not in the ascendant—an influence that works by sap and secrecy. It is that of our hierarchy. Gil Uruga is one of its tools—since it exactly suits his low instincts and treach-

erous training. Whenever the day is ripe for a fresh *pronunciamiento* against our liberties, if we are so unfortunate as to have one, he will be among the foremost of the traitors. *Carrai!* I can think of him only with disgust and loathing. Would you believe it, señor, that this fellow, now that epaulettes have been set on his shoulders—placed there for some vile service—has had the audacity to aspire to the hand of my sister? Adela Miranda standing in bridal robes by the side of Gil Uraga! I would rather see her in her shroud!’

Hamersley’s bosom swelled up under the exciting words. The young American felt an emotion almost equal to that of his host. He thought of the sweet face, that must be the original of that portrait of beautiful and innocent expression. He thought of the ruffian whose blow he had felt, and whose blood he had drawn. He thought of the wolf and the lamb.

‘But surely, Colonel Miranda,’ he said at length, ‘there could be no danger of such an event as that?’

‘Never, so long as I live. But, señor, as you

have learnt, this is a strange land—a country of quick changes. I am here to-day, commanding in this district, with power, I may almost say, over the lives of all around me. To-morrow I may be a fugitive, or dead. If the latter, where is she, my poor sister, to find the hand that could or would protect her?’

Again the breast of Hamersley heaved in a convulsive manner. Strange as it might appear, the words of his late friend seemed like an appeal to him. And it is just possible some such thought was flitting through the brain of the Mexican colonel. In the strong man by his side he saw the type of a race who can protect. It may have been in his mind that the young Kentuckian was just such an oak as he would wish to see his sister extend her arms, tendril-like, around, and cling on to for life.

Hamersley could not help having vague and varied misgivings; yet among them was one thought in the shape of a determination. It was to return to Albuquerque.

‘I am sure to be back here,’ he said, as if the

promise might in some way tranquillise the apprehensions of his friend. Then changing to a more careless tone, he added :

‘I cannot come by the spring caravan, for there would not be time enough to make my arrangements. But there is a more southern route, lately discovered, that can be travelled at any season. Perhaps I may try that. In any case, I shall write you by the trains leaving the States in spring, so that you may know when to expect me. And if, Colonel Miranda,’ he added, after a short reflective pause, in which his countenance took an altered and graver form of expression, ‘if any political trouble, such as you speak of, should occur, and you may find it necessary to flee from your own land, I need not tell you that in mine you will find a friend and a home. After what has happened here, you may depend upon the first being true, and the second hospitable, if humble.’

On that subject there was no farther exchange of speech. The two individuals so oddly and accidentally introduced, flung aside the stumps of their cigars, and, grasping hands, stood regarding

one another with the gaze of a sincere unspeakable friendship.

Next morning saw Frank Hamersley riding away from the town of Albuquerque, on the road towards the capital of New Mexico.

He did not travel alone, but with an escort of dragoons, sent to see him safe on the way. The hospitality of the Mexican commandant went beyond the walls of his house—even beyond the limits of the district he commanded—for the escort did not leave his late guest till the latter had set foot upon the *plaza* of Santa Fé.





CHAPTER IV.

SURROUNDED.

A PLAIN of pure sand, glaring red-yellow under the first rays of the rising sun, towards the east and west apparently illimitable, but interrupted northward by a chain of table-topped hills, and along its southern edge by a continuous cliff rising wall-like to the height of several hundred feet, and trending each way beyond the verge of vision.

About half-distance between this prolonged escarpment and the outlying hills, six Conestoga wagons are locked tongue and tail together, enclosing a lozenge-shaped or elliptical space—a *corral*—inside which are fifteen men and four horses.

Only ten of the men are living; the other five are dead, their bodies lying between the wheels of the wagons. Two of the horses have succumbed

to the same fate. Outside are the dead mules, several still attached to the protruding poles, broken as their bodies fell crashing across them. Fragments of leather straps and cast gearing tell of others that have torn loose and desperately escaped from the spot. Inside and all around are traces of a struggle—the ground scored and furrowed by the hoofs of horses and the booted feet of men, with here and there little rivulets and pools of blood. This, fast filtering into the sand, shows freshly spilled, some of it yet smoking. All the signs tell of a recent conflict. And so should they, since it is still going on, or only suspended to recommence a new act of the tragedy, which promises to be still more sanguinary than the one just terminated.

A tragedy easy of explanation. There is no question about why the wagons are encorralled, or how the men, mules, and horses came to be killed. Distant about three hundred yards upon the sandy plain are other men and horses, to the number of near two hundred. Their half-naked bodies of bronze colour, fantastically marked with devices in

chalk-white, charcoal-black, and vermilion-red—their buckskin breech-clouts and leggings, with plumes sticking tuft-like above their crowns—tell them to be Indians.

It is a band of the roaming red-men who have attacked a caravan of whites—no new spectacle on the prairies.

They have made the first onslaught, which was intended to stampede the caravan, and at once capture it. This was done before daybreak. Foiled in the attempt, they are now laying siege to it, having surrounded it on all sides at a distance just clearing the range of the rifles of the besieged. Their line forms the circumference of a circle of which the wagon-clump is the centre. It is not very regularly preserved, but ever changing, ever in motion, like some vast constrictor serpent that has thrown its body into a grand coil, to close whenever ready to give the fatal squeeze to its victim.

And the victim appears to have no hope of escape—no alternative but to succumb!

That the party protected by the wagons have not 'gone under' at the first onslaught of so many

enemies, is significative of their character. Of a surety they are not common emigrants crossing the prairies on their way to a new home. Had they been so, they could not have closed up their unwieldy vehicles with such speed and skill; for they had started from their night-camp, and the attack had been made while the train was in motion—advantage being taken of their slow drag through the soft yielding sand. And had they been but ordinary emigrants, they would not have stood either so promptly or courageously on the defence, and shown such an array of dead enemies around them; for in the circle of savages outside can be seen at least a score forms lying prostrate upon the plain.

There is a suspension of hostilities. The red-men, disappointed by the failure of their first charge, have retreated back to a safe distance. The death-dealing bullets of the whites, of which they have had fatal proof, for the time hold them there. The pause is not likely to be for long, as their gestures indicate.

On one side of the circle a body of them clumped

together hold counsel. Others gallop around it, as bearers of instructions that evidently relate to a changed plan of attack. With so much blood before their eyes, and the bodies of their slain comrades, it is not likely they will retire from the ground. In their shouts there is the ring of a resolved vengeance, and a speedy renewal of the fight.

‘Who do you think they are?’ asked Frank Hamersley, the proprietor of the assaulted caravan.
‘Are they Comanches, Walt?’

‘Yis; Kimanch,’ answered the individual thus addressed; ‘an’ the wust kind o’ Kimanch. They’re a band o’ the cowardly Tenawas. I kin tell by thar bows. Don’t ye see that thar’s two bends in ’em?’

‘I do.’

‘Wal, that’s the sort o’ bow the Tenawas carry—same’s the Apash.’

‘The Indians on this route were reported friendly. Why should they have attacked us so fiercely?’

‘Injuns ain’t niver friendly—not Tenawas.

They've been riled considerable of late by the Texans on the Trinity. Besides, I reck'n I kin guess another reezun. It's owin' to some whites as crossed this way last yur. Thar war a skrimmage, an' some o' the squaws got killed—I mout say murdered. Thar war some Mexikins along wi' the whites, an't war them that dud it; an' now we've got to pay for thar cussed conduct.'

'What's best for us to do, think you?'

'Thar's no best, I'm afeerd. I kin see no chance 'cept to fight it out to the bitter eend. Thar's no mercy in them yells—neer a morsel o' it.'

'What do you think they intend doing next?'

'Jest yet 'tain't easy to tell. Thar's somethin' afoot among 'em. Some darned Injun trick. Clar as I kin see that big chief with the red cross on his ribs air him they call the Horned Lizard; an' ef it be, thar ain't a cunniner coon on all this contynent. He's sharp enough to contrive some ugly trick for us. The dose we've gin the skunks may keep 'em off for a while—not long, I reck'n. Darnation! Thar's five o' our fellows wiped out

aready. It looks like as ef we've all got to go under.'

'Don't you think our best way would be to make a dash for it, and try to cut through them? If we stay here, they'll starve us out. We haven't water enough in the wagons to give us three drinks apiece.'

'I know all that, an' hev thot o't. But you forget about our hosses. Thar's only two left alive—yours and myen. All the rest air shot or stampedoed. Thurfore but two o' us would stand a chance o' gettin' clar, an' that slim enough.'

'You are right, Walt; I did not think of that. I wouldn't leave my men, even if assured of my own safety—never!'

'Nobody as knows you, Frank Hamersley, need be tolt that.'

'Boys!' continued Hamersley, raising his voice so as to be heard all over the corral; 'I needn't tell you that we're in a fix, and a bad one. There's no help for us but to fight it out; and if we must die, let us die together.'

A response from eight voices coming from dif-

ferent sides—for the men watching the movements of the enemy were posted around the enclosure—told there was not a craven among them. They were all old prairie traders—most of them from Kentucky and Tennessee.

‘In any case,’ continued the owner of the caravan, ‘we must hold our ground till night. In the darkness there may be some chance of our escaping.’

These words had scarce passed the lips of the young prairie merchant, when their effect was counteracted by an exclamation. It came from Walt Wilder, the guide of the caravan.

‘No!’ he cried, ‘not the shadder o’ a chance. They ain’t goin’ to give us till night. I knew the Horned Lizard ’ud be arter some trick. I see it now.’

‘What is it?’ asked several voices.

‘Look where that lot’s stannin’ out yonder. Can’t ye tell what they’re at, Frank Hamersley?’

‘I can see that they have got their bows in their hands.’

‘An’ thar arrers too. Don’t you see they’re

wroppin' somethin' round the heads o' the arrers
—looks like bits o' rags ?'

' I can see that.'

' Rags it air, then—sopped in spittles an' powder.'

' For what purpose ?'

' They're agoin' to set the wagons afire ! That's jest what they're goin' to do, the cowardly skunks. Now, boys, we've got to look out for squalls.'

The men, each of whom was watching the post assigned to him, despite their danger, already extreme, saw fresh cause of alarm in the announcement. Some ray of hope had hitherto withheld them from despairing. Under the protection of the wagons they might sustain a siege, so long as their ammunition lasted ; and before it gave out some chance thing, they could not think what, might turn up in their favour. It was a mere reflection founded on probabilities still unscrutinised—the last tenacious struggle before hope gives way to utter and palpable despair. Hamersley's words had for an instant cheered them ; for the thought of the Indians setting fire to the wagons

had never occurred to any of the party. It was unknown to their experience, and at such a distance too the thing might have been supposed impracticable or impossible.

But as they now looked around them, and saw the canvas tilts and light timbers, dry as chips from long exposure to the hot prairie sun; the piles of dry goods—woollen blankets, cotton and silken stuffs—that had been intended for the stores of Chihuahua, some of which they had hastily pulled from their places to form protecting barricades—when they saw all this, and then the preparations the Indians were making, it is no wonder they should feel dismay when Walt Wilder cried out, ‘*They’re a-goin’ to set the wagons afire!*’

The announcement, although carrying alarm, conveyed no counsel. Even the guide, with a life-long experience on the prairies, was at a loss how they ought to act in this unexpected emergency. In the wagons water there was none—at least not enough to have drowned out a conflagration such as that threatened; and from the way the Indians were gesturing, the traders could predict that soon

a shower of fiery missiles would be sent into their midst. None of them but had experience sufficient to admonish them of the mode intended. Even if they had never set foot upon a prairie, their school-stories and legends of early life would have told them. Arrows with tinder rag wrapt round their barbs, on fire and spitting sparks, or brightly a-blaze!

If any were ignorant of the missile, or the mode of dispatching it on its mischievous errand, it was not to be for long. Almost as soon as Wilder had given utterance to the warning words, half a score of the Indians were seen springing to the backs of their horses, each bearing a bow with a bunch of the prepared shafts; and before any steps could be taken by the besieged traders, or any counsel exchanged between them, the pyrotechnic display had commenced. It was done by the savages galloping in circles around the wagon clump, their bodies concealed behind those of their horses—only a leg and arm showing, or now and then a face seen for an instant, and then quickly withdrawn. Not exactly in circles, but in

spiral rings, at each turn contracting nearer and nearer, till the true distance was attained for sending the fiery messengers.

‘Stand to your guns, boys!’ was the hurried command of the guide, backed by a speech of encouragement from the proprietor of the caravan.

‘Two an’ two o’ ye look out thegither. Let one bring down the horse—t’other take care o’ the rider as he gits unkivered. Make sure afore ye pull trigger, an’ don’t waste so much as the snap-pin’ o’ a cap. Thar goes the first o’ the fireworks!’

As he spoke, a spark was seen to shoot out from one of the galloping horses, which, rising rocket-like into the air, came on in a parabolic curve towards the wagons. It fell short some twenty yards, and lay smoking and sputtering in the sand.

‘They han’t got thar distance yit,’ cried Walt Wilder; ‘but this child hez got his—leastwise for that skunk on the blue mustang. So hyar goes to rub him off o’ the list o’ fire-shooters.’

And with the last words went the crack of Wilder’s rifle.

The young prairie merchant by his side, sup-

posing him to have aimed only at the Indian's horse, had raised his own gun, ready to take the rider as soon as he should be uncovered.

‘No need, Frank,’ said the guide, restraining him. ‘This child don’t waste two churges o’ powder that way. Keep your bullet for the karkidge o’ the next as comes ’ithin range. Look yonder! I know’d I’d fetch him out o’ his stirrups, tight as he’s tried to cling to ’em. Thar he goes to grass!’

Hamersley, as also the others on the same side of the corral with Wilder, thought that the shot had been a miss; for the Indian at whom he had aimed still stuck to his horse, and was carried for some distance on in a curving career. Nor did the animal show any sign of having been hit. But the rider was. While engaged in the effort of sending his arrow, the savage had exposed his face, one arm, and part of the other; and ere he could withdraw them, the bullet had struck him on the arm that supported him, breaking the bone close to the elbow-joint. He had clung on with the tenacity of a shot squirrel, knowing that to

let go would be certain death to him. But, despite all his efforts the crippled arm failed to sustain him; and, with a despairing cry, he at length dropped to the ground. Before he could rise to his feet, his body was bored by a bullet from one of the men watching on that side, which laid him out lifeless upon the sand.

No cheer of triumph rose up among the wagons—the situation of those who defended them was too serious for any such idle exhibition. The man who had fired the last shot only hastened to reload his rifle; while the others remained mute and motionless, each on the look-out for a like opportunity. The fall of their comrade taught the other freebooters a lesson, and for a time they made their approach with more caution. But the shouts of those standing spectators in the outer circle stimulated them to fresh efforts, as the slightest show of cowardice would have caused them to be taunted. Those intrusted with the fiery arrows were all young warriors, chosen for the dangerous service, or volunteers to perform it. The eyes of their chief and the braves of the tribe

were upon them. These were thirsting for glory, as those for revenge; and by the former, life was held as of little account in the face of an achievement that would gain them the distinction most coveted by an Indian youth—the glory that might give him rank as a warrior, and perhaps some day raise him to a chieftaincy.

Stimulated by this thought, they soon forgot the check caused by the fall of their comrade; and laying aside caution they closed nearer and nearer, till their arrows one after another went hurtling through the air, and dropped like a continuous shower of spent rocket-sticks upon the covers of the wagons.

Several fell under the bullets from the barricade; but their places were supplied by fresh volunteers from the outside circle, and the sparkling shower was kept up till a curl of smoke was seen soaring from the white tilts of the wagons; not one, but half a dozen of them, and on different sides of the corral.

‘We’re on fire!’ cried Walt Wilder, looking above and around—‘on fire iverywhar!’

‘Great God! yes; what are we to do?’ asked several voices despairingly.

‘What are we to do?’ shouted the guide in response. ‘What *kin* we do, but fight it out to the death, an’ then die! So, boys, let us die, not like dogs, but as men—as *Americans*!’





CHAPTER V.

KNIFE, PISTOL, AND HATCHET.

THE brave words had scarce passed from Walt Wilder's lips, when the wagons became enveloped in smoke. From all sides the cloud rolled into the corral, and the men could no longer see one another.

Still through the obscurity rang their cries of mutual encouragement, repeating the determination so tersely expressed.

There was no water by which to extinguish the fast-threatening flames; yet, in that moment of emergency, they thought of an expedient. There were shovels in the wagons; and laying hold of these, they commenced flinging sand over the spots that had caught fire, with the intent to smother

the incipient blaze. Left alone and with time they would have succeeded. But they were not left alone : for the savages, seeing the advantage they had gained, were now fast closing for a final charge upon the corral, and the implements of industry had to be abandoned.

They were thrown despairingly aside ; and the men, once more grasping their rifles, sprang back into the wagons, each with eager eye searching for an assailant. Though themselves half blinded by the smoke, they could still see the enemy outside ; for the Indians, grown confident by the *coup* they had made, were now riding recklessly nearer. Quick came the reports of rifles—faster and more frequent than ever ; fast as ten men—all practised marksmen—could load and fire. In less than sixty seconds nearly a score of savages dropped down from their horses, pierced by the fatal bullet—till the plain appeared strewn with dead bodies.

But the crisis had come—the time for a general charge of the whole band ; and now the dusky outside ring was seen gradually contracting toward

the wagons—the warriors advancing from all sides, some on foot, others on horseback, each eager to secure the trophy of a scalp.

On they came with wild vengeful gestures, with wilder and more vengeful yells.

To the besieged it was the moment of despair. The wagons were on fire all around them. In several places flames were beginning to flicker up through the smoke. They no longer made attempts to extinguish them. They saw it would be idle.

Did they think of surrender? No—not a man of them. That would have been equally idle. In the voices of the advancing foe there was not one tone—one accent of mercy.

Surrender! and be slain afterwards! Before death to be tortured, perhaps dragged at a horse's tail, or set up as a target for the Tenawa sharpshooters to practise at. No! They would have to die anyhow. Better now than then. They were not the men to offer both cheeks to the insulter. They could resign sweet life, sweeter with corpses of Indians lying thickly around them. They

would first make a hecatomb of their hated foes, and then fall upon it. That is the sort of death preferred by the prairie man—hunter, trapper, or trader—glorious to him as the cannon-furrowed field to the soldier. That is the sort of death of which Walt Wilder spoke when he said: ‘*Let us die, not like dogs, but as men—as Americans!*’

By this time the smoke had completely shrouded the wagons, the enclosed space between, and a fringe of some depth around them. But a still darker ring was around all—the circle of savage horsemen, who from all sides had galloped up, and dismounted to make surer work of the slaughter. The warriors jostled one another as they pressed forward afoot, each thirsting for a trophy—a scalp.

The last throes of the conflict had come. It was no longer to be a duel at a distance—no more a contest between rifle-bullets and barbed arrows; but the close desperate hand-to-hand conflict of pistol, knife, spear, club, and hatchet.

The ten white men—none of them yet hurt—knew well what was before them. Not one of

them blanched, or talked of backing. They did not even think of surrender.

It would have been too late to sue for mercy, had they been so inclined. But they were not. Attacked without provocation and treacherously, as they had been, their fury was stronger than their fear, and anger now nerved them to a frenzied energy of action.

The Indians were no longer advancing upon them. They were already close around the wagons, clustering upon the wheels, or like snakes wriggling through the spaces left undefended. Rifles had ceased to ring; but pistols cracked—repeating-pistols that dealt death at every shot, sending red-skin after red-skin to the happy hunting-grounds. And by the pistol's flash blades were seen gleaming through the smoke, now bright, but soon dimmed and dripping blood.

For every white man that fell, at least three Indians dropped dead upon the sand.

The unequal contest could not long continue. Scarce ten minutes did it last, and but for the obscuring smoke five would have finished it. This

was in favour of the assailed, enabling them to act with advantage against the assailants. Such a quick wholesale slaughter did the white men make with their repeating-pistols, that the savages, surprised and staggered by it, for a moment recoiled, and appeared as if again going to retreat. They did not—they dared not. Their superior numbers—the shame of being defeated by such a handful of foes—the glory of conquest—and, added to it, an angry vengeance now hot in their hearts—all urged them on; and the attack was renewed with greater earnestness than ever.

Throughout every scene in the strife, Frank Hamersley had comported himself with a courage that made his men feel less fear of death, and less regret to die by his side. Fighting like a lion, and shouting encouragement to his comrades, he had been here and there and everywhere. He had done his full share of killing.

It was all in vain. Though standing in the midst of thick smoke, unseeing and unseen, he knew that most of his faithful men had fallen. He was admonished of this by the less frequent re-

sponses to the cries of encouragement, telling him the struggle was close upon its termination. No wonder his fury was fast giving place to despair. But it was no craven fear, nor any thought of escape. His determination not to be taken alive was strong as ever.

His hand still firmly clasped the bowie-knife—its blade dripping with the blood of more than one enemy, for into the body of more than one savage had he plunged it. He clutched it with the determination still farther to kill—to take yet another life before parting with his own. It was hopeless, useless slaughtering; but it was sweet. He was insane with anger, and thought it sweet.

Three dusky antagonists lay dead at his feet, and he was dashing through the corral in search of a fourth. A giant form loomed up before him—looking more gigantic from the magnifying effect of the smoke. It was not that of a savage. It was Walt Wilder.

‘Dead beat!’ hoarsely and hurriedly shouted the guide. ‘We must go under, Frank. We’re boun’ to go under, if we don’t—’

‘Don’t what, Walt?’

‘Git away from hyar.’

‘Impossible.’

‘No. Thar’s still a chance, I think—for us two anyways. Thar ain’t many o’ the others left, an’ ef thar war, we can’t do ’em any good now. Our stayin’ ’ud be no use to ’em—no use dyin’ along wi’ ’em; an ef we git clar, we’ll revenge ’em. Don’t ye see our hosses are still safe? Thar they air, cowerin’ clost in agin one o’ the wagons. Tain’t much chance, I admit, still thar’s a shadder. Come on! let’s try it!’

Hamersley hesitated. It was the thought of deserting even the last of his faithful followers, who had sacrificed, or were still sacrificing, their lives in his service. But as the guide had truly said, what good could he do them by staying to be killed? And he might survive to avenge them?

The last thought would have decided him. But Wilder had not waited for the determination. While speaking the urgent words, he had laid his huge hand upon Hamersley’s shoulder, and half led, half dragged him in the direction of the horses.

‘Keep hold o’ yur rifle, though it be empy,’ hurriedly counselled the guide. ‘If we shed get away, it will be needed. We mout as well go under hyar as be up on the paraira ’ithout a gun. Now mount!’

Almost mechanically the young Kentuckian climbed upon the back of the horse nearest him—his own. The guide had not yet mounted his, and Hamersley saw through the smoke that he was leaning against the wheel of one of the wagons. In an instant after he perceived that the vehicle was in motion, and he could hear a slight grating noise as the tire turned in the sand. The great Conestoga with its load had yielded to the strength of the Colossus.

In another instant a horseman was by his side, who muttered in his ear:

‘Now, Frank, I’ve opened a crack atween the two. Let’s cut out through it. We kin keep in the kiver o’ the smoke, as far as it’ll screen us. You foller, an’ see that ye don’t lose sight o’ me. If we must go under in the eend, let it be out on the open plain, an’ not shet up hyar like badgers

in a berril. Follow me clost, Frank. Now or niver !'

Almost mechanically, Hamersley yielded obedience ; and in ten seconds after, the two horsemen had cleared the wagon clump, with the shouting crowd that encircled it, and were going at full gallop across the sandy plain.





CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH THE SMOKE.

IN making their bold dash, Walt Wilder was not acting without a plan. He had one, preconceived. The smoke, with its covering cloud, might be the means of concealment and salvation ; at all events it might cover their retreat long enough to give them a start of the pursuers, and then the speed of their horses could possibly be depended upon for the rest.

They followed this plan ; but unfortunately soon found that the smoke was not drifting in the right direction. The breeze carried it almost straight towards the line of the cliffs, while their only chance would be to strike for the open plain. At the cliffs their flight would be stopped, for there appeared to be no passage either for man or horse.

So far the cloud of smoke had favoured them. Thick and stifling in the immediate vicinity of the wagons, it had enabled them to slip unobserved through the ruck of savages. Many of these, still mounted, had seen them pass outward, but through the blue film had mistaken them for two of their own men. They perhaps knew nothing of the animals inside the corral, and did not expect to see any of their caged enemies attempting to escape on horseback. Besides they were now busy endeavouring to extinguish the fires in the wagons, all resistance being at an end.

As yet there was no sign of pursuit, and the fugitives kept on with the protecting *nimbus* around them. In the soft sand their horses' hoofs made no trampling noise, and they galloped towards the cliff silent as spectres.

On reaching the rocks, it became necessary for them either to change the direction of their flight, or bring it to a termination. The red-sandstone escarpment towered vertically before them, like a wall of rude mason-work. A cat could not have

scaled it, much less horse or man. They paused to consider.

Should they at once ride out from the smoke, or for a time keep within its friendly shelter?

By doing the first they were sure of being discovered, and by staying all the same.

The cloud would soon clear off, and they would then be seen from the wagons. Already it was fast thinning around them; the Indians having nearly extinguished the fires in order to save the treasure—which had no doubt been their chief object for attacking the caravan. They had stilled the flames by flinging sand upon them. Soon there would be no smoke—and then? The pursued men stayed not for farther reflection. Delay would only add to their danger; and with this thought urging them on, they wheeled their horses to the left, and headed along the line of the bluff. Six seconds after and they were riding in a pure atmosphere, under a clear dazzling sunlight.

But it gave them no joy. A yell from the wagons told them they were seen, and simul-

taneously with the shout they perceived a score of horsemen spurring up at full-speed toward them.

They were both splendidly mounted, and might still have had a fair chance of escape; but now another sight met their eyes that once more drove them to despair.

A promontory of the cliff, stretching far out into the sandy plain, lay directly in their track. Its point was nearer to the pursuers than to them. Before they could reach and turn it, their retreat would be intercepted.

Might they escape in the opposite direction?

Again suddenly turning, they galloped back as they had come; again entered the belt of smoke, and riding on through it, reached the clear sunlight beyond.

Again a torturing disappointment. Another promontory—twin to the first—juttet out there to obstruct them.

There was no mystery in the matter. They saw the mistake they had made. In escaping under cover of the smoke, they had gone too far, having ridden into a deep embayment of the cliff.

Their pursuers, who had turned promptly as they, once more had the advantage. The projecting point was nearer to them, and they would be almost certain to arrive at it first.

For the fugitives there appeared no alternative but to ride on, and take the chances of hewing their way through the savage host.

‘Git your knife riddy, Frank!’ shouted Wilder, as he dug his spurs into his horse’s sides, and put the animal to his full speed. ‘Let’s keep close thegither—livin’ or dead, let’s keep close thegither!’

Their steeds needed no urging. To an American horse accustomed to the prairies, there is no spur like the yell of an Indian; for he knows that along with it usually comes the shock of a bullet, or the sting of a barbed shaft.

Both bounded off together, and went over the soft sand, silent, but swift as the wind.

In vain. Before they could reach the projecting point, the savages were clustering around it; and with spears couched, bows bent, and clubs brandished, stood ready to receive them. It was a

gauntlet that a chased tiger might despair of being able to run.

Truly seemed their retreat now cut off, and surely did death appear to be staring them in the face. So thought the young prairie merchant, as he turned despairingly toward his companion.

With a quick searching glance Wilder ran his eye along the base of the cliff. The rock of red sandstone rose rugged and frowning, full five-hundred feet overhead. To the superficial glance it seemed to forbid all chance either of being scaled or of giving concealment. There was not even a boulder below, behind which they could find shelter from the shafts of the pursuers. For all that, Wilder continued to scan it, as if he was recalling some old recollection.

‘It must be the place,’ he muttered. ‘It is, by G—d!’ he added more emphatically, once more wrenching his horse around, spurring on, and crying out to his companion to follow him.

Hamersley obeyed, and rode off without knowing what next. But in another instant he divined the intent of this sudden change in the tactics of

his fellow-fugitive. There was an opening in the precipitous escarpment!

It was a mere crack or chine, scarce so wide as a doorway, and barely large enough to admit a man on horseback. Vertically it traversed to the top of the cliff, splitting its façade from base to summit.

‘From yur hoss!’ cried Wilder, as he pulled-up in front of it, at the same time flinging himself off his own. ‘Drop the bridle and leave him be-hint. One o’ ’em ’ll be enough for what I want, an’ let it be myen. Poor critter, it air a pitty too! But it can’t be helped. We must hev some kiver to screen us. Quick, Frank, quick, or the skunks ’ll be on to us!’

Painful as it was to abandon his brave steed, Hamersley did as directed without well knowing why. The last speeches of the guide were somewhat enigmatical, but he knew they must have meaning, and that of importance.

‘Now up into the kanyon, ’ithout losin’ a second. Hyar, take my rifle, an’ load both o’ ’em, whiles I see to the closin’ o’ the gap.’

Seizing both guns in his grasp, Hamersley sprang into the chine, stopping when he had got well inside the jaws. Wilder followed, leading his horse by the bridle. There was a stone lying across the aperture, over which the horse had to straddle. It was above two feet in height, and when he had got his forelegs over it, Wilder held him at a stand. Though hitherto following with meek obedience, the horse trembled, and showed the inclination to shy back. There was an expression in his owner's eye he had never seen there before—something that frayed him. But he could not now escape, even if ever so inclined. With his ribs close pressing the rocks on either side, he could not rear round, and a firm hold in front hindered him from backing.

Hamersley, busily engaged in loading the rifles, nevertheless found time to glance at Wilder's doings, wondering what he was about.

‘It air a pity!’ again exclaimed the guide, repeating the same words, and in a similar tone of commiseration. ‘But it must be done. If thar war a rock big enough, or a log, or anythin’. No!

thar ain't neer a thing. 'No other chance to make kiver. So hyar goes for a bit o' butcherin'.'

As the guide thus delivered himself, Hamersley saw him pluck the bowie-knife from his belt, its blade black-red with human gore. In another instant its edge was drawn across the throat of the horse, leaving a gash behind from which the blood gushed forth in a thick strong stream, like water from the spout of a pump. The animal made a desperate effort to back; but with his head dragged down to his forelegs over the rock, he was unable to stir from the spot. After a convulsive throe or two, he sank down, till his belly touched the stone underneath. In this attitude he ended his life; his head after a time dropping down, his eye apparently turned with a last reproachful look upon the master who had murdered him.

'It hed to be did; thar war no help for it,' said Walt Wilder, as he hurriedly turned towards his companion. 'Have you got the guns churged?'

Hamersley made answer by handing to the guide his own gun. It was loaded and ready.

'Darn the stinkin' cowarts!' he exclaimed,

grasping it, and then facing towards the plain. 'I don't know how it may all eend, but this 'll keep 'em off a while, anyhow.'

As he spoke he threw himself behind the body of his slaughtered steed, that, sustained in an upright position between the counterpart walls, formed a safe barricade against the bullets and arrows of the Indians. These, now riding straight towards the spot, made the rocks resound with exclamations of surprise—shouts that spoke of a delayed, perhaps defeated, vengeance.

They took care, however, not to come within range of that long steel-gray tube, that, turning like a telescope on its pivot, commanded a semi-circle of at least a hundred yards radius around the opening in the cliff.





CHAPTER VII.

THE PURSUERS AT BAY.

DESPITE all the earnestness of their vengeful anger, the savage pursuers were now fairly at bay, and for a time could be kept so.

Hamersley looked upon it as being but a respite—a mere temporary deliverance from danger, yet to terminate in death. They had got into a crevice of rock, where, to all appearance, they could defend themselves as long as their ammunition lasted, or as they could withstand the assaults of thirst or the cravings of hunger. How were they to get out again? As well might they have been besieged in a cave, with no chance of sortie or escape.

These thoughts he communicated to his companion, as soon as they found time to talk.

‘Hunger an’ thirst ain’t nothin’ to do wi’ it,’ was Wilder’s response. ‘We ain’t agoin’ to stay hyar not twenty minutes, if this child kin manage it as he intends ter do. Ye don’t s’pose I rushed into this hyar hole like a chased rabbit? No, Frank; I’ve heern o’ this place afore, from some fellurs thet, like ourselves, made *caché* in it from a band o’ pursuing Kimanch. Thar’s a way leads out at the back; an’ jest as soon as we kin throw dust in the eyes o’ these yellin’ varmint in front, we’ll put straight for it. I don’t know what sort o’ a passage thar is—up the rocks by some kind o’ raveen, I b’lieve. We must do our best to find it.’

‘But how do you intend to keep them from following us? You speak of throwing dust in their eyes—how, Walt?’

‘You wait, watch, an’ see. You won’t hev yur patience terrifically tried; for thar ain’t much time to spare about it. Thar’s another passage up the clifts, not far off: not a doubt but these Injuns know it; an’ ef we don’t make haste, they’ll git up thar, an’ come in upon us by the back-door; which trick won’t do, nohow-somedever.

You keep yurself in readiness, an' watch what I'm agoin' to do. When you see me scoot up backwards, foller 'ithout sayin' a word.'

Hamersley promised compliance ; and the guide, still kneeling behind the barricade he had so cruelly constructed, commenced a series of manœuvres that held his companion in speechless conjecture.

He first placed his gun in such a position, that the barrel resting across the hips of the dead horse projected beyond the tail. In this position he made it fast, by tying the butt with a piece of string to a projecting part of the saddle. He next took the cap from his head—a coon-skin it was—and set it so that its upper edge could be seen alongside the pommel, and rising about three inches above the croup. The ruse was an old one, with some new additions and embellishments.

'It's all done now,' said Wilder, turning away from the carcass, and crouching back to where his comrade awaited him. 'Come on, Frank. If they don't diskiver the trick till we've got time to

speel up the clift, then thar's still a chance for us. Come on, an' keep clost arter me !'

Frank followed without saying a word. He knew that his guide, well known and long trusted, had a reason for everything he did. It was not the time to question him, or discuss the prudence of the step he was taking. There might be danger before, but there was death—sure death—behind them.

In less than a dozen paces from its entrance, the chine opened into a wider space, again closing like a pair of callipers. It was a hollow of elliptical shape—resembling an old-fashioned butter-boat—scooped out of the solid rock, on all sides precipitous, except at its upper end. Here a ravine, sloping down from the summit-level above, would, to the geologist, at once proclaim the secret of its formation. Not so easily explained might seem the narrow outlet to the open plain. But one skilled in the testimony of the rocks would detect certain ferruginous veins in the sandstone, that, refusing to yield to the erosion of the running stream, had stood for countless ages.

Neither Walt Wilder nor the young Kentuckian gave thought to such scientific speculations, as they retreated through the narrow gap, and back into the wider gorge. All they knew, or cared for, was, that a gulley at the opposite end was seen to slope upward, promising a path to the plain above.

In sixty seconds they were in it; toiling onward and upward amidst a chaos of rocks, where no horse could follow—loose boulders, that looked as if hurled down from the heavens above, or belched upward from the bowels of the earth.

The retreat of the fugitives up the ravine, like their dash out of the enclosed corral, was still but a doubtful effort. Neither of them had full confidence of being able eventually to escape. It was like the wounded squirrel clutching at the last tiny twig of a tree, however unable to support it. They were not quite certain that the sloping gorge would give them a path to the upper plain; for Wilder had only a doubtful recollection of what some trapper had told him. But even if it did, the Indians, expert climbers as they were, would

soon be after them, close upon their heels. The ruse could not remain long undetected.

They had plunged into the chasm as drowning men grasp at the nearest thing afloat—a slender branch or bunch of grass, a straw.

As they now ascended the rock-strewn gorge both had their reflections, which, though unspoken, were very similar. And from these came a gleam of hope. If they could but reach the summit-level of the cliff! Their pursuers could of course do the same; but not on horseback. It would then be a contest of pedestrian speed. The white men felt confidence in their swiftness of foot; in this respect believing themselves superior to their savage pursuers. They knew that the Comanches were *horse Indians*, a significant fact. These centaurs of the central plateaux, scarce ever setting foot upon the earth, when afoot are almost as helpless as birds with their wings plucked or pinioned.

If they could reach the crest of the cliff, then all might yet be well; and cheered by this thought, they rushed up the rock-strewn ravine, now

gliding along ledges, now squeezing their bodies between great boulders, or springing from one to the other—in the audacity of their bounds rivalling a brace of big-horns.

They had got more than half-way up, when cries came pealing up the glen behind them. Still were they hidden from the eyes of their pursuers. Jutting points of rock, and huge masses that lay loose in the bed of the ravine, had hitherto concealed them. But for these, bullets and arrows would have been whistling about their ears, and perhaps put an end to their flight. The savages were near enough to send either gun-shot or shaft, and their voices, borne upward on the air, sounded as clear as if they were close at hand.

The fugitives, as already said, had reached more than half-way up the slope, and were beginning to congratulate themselves on a fair chance of escape. They even thought of the course they should take on arriving at the summit-level, for they knew there was an open plain above. All at once they were brought to a stop, though not by anything that obstructed their path. On the con-

trary, it only seemed easier ; for there were now two ways open to them instead of one—the ravine at this point forking into two distinct branches. There was a choice of which to take, and it was this that caused them to make stop, at the same time creating embarrassment.

The pause, however, was but for a brief space of time—only long enough to make a hasty reconnaissance. In the promise of an easy ascent there seemed but little difference between the two paths, and the guide soon came to a determination.

‘It’s a toss-up atween ’em,’ he said ; ‘but let’s take the one to the right. It looks a leetle the likest.’

Of course his fellow-fugitive did not dissent, and they struck into the right-hand ravine ; but not until Walt Wilder had plucked the red kerchief from his head, and flung it as far as he could up the left one, where it was left lying in a conspicuous position among the rocks.

He did not say why he had thus strangely abandoned the remnant of his head-gear ; but his companion, sufficiently experienced in the ways

and wiles of prairie life, stood in no need of an explanation.

The track they had now taken was of comparatively easy ascent; and it was this, perhaps, that had tempted Wilder to take it. But, like most things, both in the moral and physical world, its easiness proved a delusion. They had not gone twenty paces farther up when the sloping chasm terminated. It debouched on a little platform, covered with large loose stones, that there rested after having fallen from the cliff above.

But at a single glance they saw that this cliff could not be scaled!

They had entered into a trap, out of which there was no chance of escape or retreat, without throwing themselves back upon the breasts of their pursuers.

The Indians were already ascending the main ravine. By their voices it could be told that they had reached the point where it divided; for there was a momentary suspension of their cries, as with the baying of hounds thrown suddenly off the scent.

It would not be for long. They would likely first follow up the chasm where the kerchief had been cast; but should that also prove a *cul-de-sac*, they would return and try the other.

The fugitives saw that it was too late to retrace their steps. They sprang together upon the platform, and commenced searching among the loose rocks, with a faint hope of finding some place of concealment.

It was but a despairing sort of search, again like to drowning men who clutch at a straw.

All at once an exclamation from the guide called his companion to his side. It was accompanied by a gesture, and followed by words low-muttered.

‘Look hyar, Frank! Look at this hole! Darnation! let’s get into it!’

As Hamersley came close he perceived a dark cavity among the stones, to which Wilder was pointing. It opened vertically downward, and was of an irregular roundish shape, somewhat resembling the mouth of a well, half-coped with slabs.

Dare they enter it? Could they? What depth was it?

Wilder took up a pebble and flung it down. They could hear it descending, not at a single drop, but striking and ricochetting from side to side.

It was long before it reached the bottom and lay silent. No matter for that. The noise made in its descent told them of projecting points, or ledges, that might give them a foothold.

They lost not a moment of time, but commenced letting themselves down into the funnel-shaped shaft, the guide going first.

Slowly and silently they went down—like ghosts through the stage of a theatre—soon disappearing in the gloom below, and leaving upon the rock-strewn platform no trace to show that human foot had ever trodden it.





CHAPTER VIII.

IN DARKNESS.

FORTUNATELY for the fugitives, the cavern into which they had crept was a shaft of but slight diameter; otherwise they could not have gone down without dropping far enough to cause death; for the echoes from the pebble betokened a vast vertical depth.

As it was, the void turned out to be somewhat like that of a stone-built chimney, with here and there a point left projecting. It was so narrow, moreover, that they were able to use both hands and knees in the descent; and by this means they accomplished it.

They went but slowly, and took care to proceed with caution. They knew that a false step,

the slipping of a foot or finger, or the breaking of a fragment that gave hold to their hands, would precipitate them to an unknown depth.

They did not go farther than was necessary for quick concealment. There was noise made in their descent; and they knew that the Indians would soon be above and might hear them. Their only hope lay in their pursuers believing them to have gone* by the left-hand path to the plain above. In time the Indians would surely explore both branches of the ravine; and if the cunning savages should suspect their presence in the shaft, there would be no hope for them. These thoughts decided them to come to a stop as soon as they could find foothold.

About thirty feet from the top they found this, on a point of rock or ledge that jutted horizontally. It was broad enough to give both fair standing-room, and, as they were now in the midst of amorphous darkness, they took stand upon it.

The Indians might at any moment arrive on the platform above. They felt confident they could not be seen; but they might be heard.

The slightest sound borne upward to the ears of the savages might betray them; and knowing this, they stood still, scarce exchanging a whisper, and almost afraid to breathe.

It was not long before they saw that which justified their caution—the plumed head of a savage, with his neck craned over the edge of the aperture, outlined conspicuously against the blue sky above. And soon half-a-dozen similar silhouettes beside it; while they could hear distinctly the talk that was passing overhead.

Wilder had some knowledge of the Comanche tongue, and could make out most of what was being said. Amidst exclamations that spoke of vengeance, there were words in a calmer tone—discussion, inquiry, and conjecture.

From these it could be understood that the pursuers had separated into two parties—one following on the false track, by the path which the guide had baited for them, the other coming direct up the right and true one.

There were bitter exclamations of disappointment, and threats of an implacable vengeance;

and the fugitives, as they listened, might have reflected how fortunate they had been in finding that unfathomed hole. But for it they would have already been in the clutches of a cruel enemy.

However, they had little time for reflection. The talk overheard at first expressed doubts as to their having descended the shaft; but doubts readily to be set at rest.

The eyes of the Indians having failed to inform them, their heads were withdrawn; and soon after a stone came tumbling down the cavity.

Something of this kind Wilder had predicted; for he flattened himself against the wall behind, and stood as 'small' as his colossal frame would permit, having cautioned his companion to do the same.

The stone passed without striking them, and went crashing on till it struck on the bottom below.

Another followed, and another; the third creasing Hamersley on the breast, and tearing a couple of buttons from his coat.

This was shaving close—too close to be comfortable. Perhaps the next boulder might re-

bound from the wall above, and strike one or both of them dead.

In fear of this result, they commenced groping to find whether the ledge offered any better screen from the dangerous shower, which promised to rain for some time longer.

Good ! Hamersley felt his hand enter a hole that opened horizontally. It proved big enough to admit his body, as also the larger frame of his companion. Both were soon inside it. It was a sort of grotto they had discovered ; and crouched inside it, they could laugh to scorn the storm that still came rattling from above, the stones hissing and hurtling like aerolites as they passed close to their faces.

The rocky rain at length ended. The Indians had evidently come to the conclusion, that it was either barren in result, or must have effectually performed the purpose intended by it ; and for a short time there was silence above and below.

They who were hidden in the shaft might have supposed that their persecutors, satisfied at what

they had accomplished, were returning to the plain, and had retired from the spot.

Hamersley did think so; but Walt, an old prairie man, more skilled in the Indian character, could not console himself with such a fancy.

‘Ne’er a bit o’ it,’ he whisperingly said to his companion. ‘They ain’t agoin’ to leave us that easy; not if Horned Lizard be amongst ’em. They’ll either stay thar till we climb out agin, or try to smoke us. Ye may take my word for it, Frank, thar’s some’ut to come yit. Look up! Didn’t I tell ye so?’

Wilder drew back out of the narrow aperture—through which he had been craning his neck and shoulders in order to get a view of what was passing above.

The hole leading into the grotto that held them was barely large enough to admit the body of a man. Hamersley took his place, and turning his eyes upward, at once saw what his comrade referred to. It was the smoke of a fire, that appeared in the act of being kindled near the edge of the aperture above. The smoke was ascending

towards the sky, diagonally drifting across the blue disk outlined by the rim of rock.

He had barely time to make the observation, when a swishing sound admonished him to draw back his head; and there passed before his face a ruck of falling stalks and fagots, in which sparks and flame were commingled. Some of them settled upon the ledge, the rest sweeping on to the bottom of the abyss.

In a moment after, the shaft was filled with smoke, but not that of an ordinary wood fire. Even this would have been sufficient to stifle them where they were; but the fumes now entering their nostrils were of a kind to cause suffocation almost instantaneously.

The fagots set on fire were the stalks of the creosote plant—the *ideodondo* of the Mexican table-lands, well known for its power to cause asphyxia. Walt Wilder recognised it at the first whiff.

‘It’s the stink-weed!’ he exclaimed. ‘That darned stink-weed o’ New Mexico! It’ll kill us if we can’t keep it out. Off wi’ your coat, Frank;

it are bigger than my hunting-shirt. Let's spread it acrost the hole, an' see if that 'll do.'

His companion obeyed with alacrity, stripping off his coat as quickly as the circumscribed space would permit. Fortunately, it was a garment of the sack speciality, without any split in the tail, and when extended, offered a good breadth of surface.

It proved sufficient for the purpose ; and before the little grotto had become so filled with smoke as to be absolutely untenable, its entrance was closed by a curtain of broadcloth, held so hermetically over the aperture that even the fumes of assafoetida could not possibly have penetrated inside.

For nearly half an hour they kept the coat spread, holding it close around the edges of the aperture with their heads, hands, knees, and elbows. Withal some of the bitter smoke found ingress, torturing their eyes, and half-stifling them.

They bore it with philosophic fortitude and in profound silence, using their utmost efforts to refrain from sneezing or coughing.

They knew that the least noise heard by the Indians above, anything to indicate their presence in the shaft, would insure their destruction. The fumigation would be continued till the savages were certain of its having had a fatal effect. If they could hold out long enough, even Indian astuteness might be baffled.

From what Wilder had heard, their persecutors were in doubt about their having descended into the shaft; and this uncertainty promised to be their salvation. Unless sure that they were taking all this trouble to some purpose, the red-men would not dally long over their work. Besides, there was the rich booty to be drawn from the captured wagons, which would attract the Indians back to them, each having an interest in being present at the distribution.

Thus reasoned Walt Wilder, as they listened to detect a change in the performance—making use of all their ears.

Of course they could see nothing, no more than if they had been immured in the darkest cell of an Inquisitorial dungeon. Only by their ears

might they make any guess at what was going on. These admonished them that more of the burning brush was being heaved into the hole. Every now and then they could hear it as it went swishing past the door of their curtained chamber, the stalks and sticks rasping against the rocks in their descent.

After a time these sounds ceased to be heard; the Indians no doubt thinking that sufficient of the inflammatory matter had been cast in to cause their complete destruction. If inside the cavern, they must by this time be stifled—asphyxiated—dead.

So must have reasoned the red-skinned fumigators; for after a while they desisted from their hellish task. But as if to make assurance doubly sure, before taking departure from the spot they performed another act indicative of an equally merciless intention.

During the short period of silence their victims could not tell what they were about. They only knew, by occasional sounds reaching them from above, that there was some change in the perform-

ance; but what it was, they could not even shape a conjecture.

The interregnum at length ended with a loud rumbling noise, that was itself suddenly terminated by a grand crash, as if a portion of the impending cliff had become detached, and fallen down upon the platform.

Then succeeded a silence, unbroken by the slightest sound. No longer was heard either noise or voice—not the murmur of one.

It was a silence that resembled death: as if the vindictive savages had one and all met a deserved doom, by being crushed under the falling cliff!

For some time after hearing this mysterious noise, which had caused the rock to tremble around them, the two men remained motionless within their place of concealment.

At length Wilder cautiously and deliberately pushed aside the curtain. At first only a small portion of it—a corner, so as to make sure about the smoke.

It still oozed in, but not voluminously as at first. It had evidently become attenuated, and was grow-

ing thinner. It appeared also to be ascending with rapidity, as up the funnel of a chimney having a good draught. For this reason it was carried past the mouth of the grotto, without much of it drifting in, and they saw that they could soon safely withdraw the curtain. It was a welcome relaxation from the irksome task that had been so long imposed upon them—and the coat was at length permitted to drop down upon the ledge.

Although there were no longer any sounds heard, or other signs to indicate the presence of the Indians, the fugitives did not feel sure of their having gone; and it was some time before they made any attempt to reascend the shaft. Some of their pursuers might still be lurking near, or straying within sight. They had so far escaped death, as if by a miracle, and they were cautious of again tempting fate. They determined that for some time yet they would not venture out upon the ledge, but keep inside the grotto that had given them such well-timed shelter. Some sulky savage, disappointed at not getting their scalps, might take it into his head to return, and hurl down into

the hole another shower of stones. Such a whim was probable to a prairie Indian.

Cautious against all like contingencies, the guide counselled his younger companion to patience; and for a considerable time they remained without stirring out of their obscure chamber.

At length, however, perceiving that the tranquillity continued, they no longer deemed it rash to make a reconnoissance; and for this purpose Walt Wilder crawled out upon the ledge, and looked upward.

A feeling of surprise, mingled with apprehension, at once seized upon him.

‘Kin it be night?’ he asked, whispering the words back into the grotto.

‘Not yet, I should think,’ answered Hamersley. ‘The fight was begun before daybreak. The day can’t all have passed yet. But why do you ask, Walt?’

‘Because thar’s no light comin’ from above. Whar’s the bit o’ blue sky we seed? Thar ain’t the breadth o’ a hand visible. It can’t a be the smoke as hides it. That seems most cleared off.

Darned if I kin see a steim o' the sky! 'Bove as below, everything's as black as the ten o' spades. What the darnation kin it mean?'

Without waiting a reply, or staying for his companion to come out upon the ledge, Wilder rose to his feet, and grasping the projecting points above his head, commenced swarming up the shaft, in a similar manner as that by which he had made the descent.

Hamersley, who by this time had crept out of the grotto, stood upon the ledge listening.

He could hear his comrade as he scrambled up; the rasping of his feet against the rocks, and his stentorian breathings.

At length Walt appeared to have reached the top, when Hamersley heard words that sent a thrill of horror throughout his whole frame.

'O God!' cried the guide, in his surprise forgetting to subdue the tone of his voice, 'they've built us up! Thar's a stone over the mouth o' the hole—shettin' it like a pot-lid. A stone!—a rock that no mortal ked move. Frank Hamersley! it's all over wi' us: *we're buried alive!*'



CHAPTER IX.

A SAVAGE SATURNAL.

THE sanguinary strife ended with the capture of the caravan. When the smoke of the extinguished fires drifted aside, and the sunlight once more fell free upon the wagons, a horrible picture was presented.

Within the corral lay the bodies of thirteen white men, their heads without hair, and the crown of each showing a disk of crimson colour. The scalping-knife had already done its bloody work; and the hideous trophies were seen drooping from the points of spears triumphantly poised by the savage victors.

Their triumph had cost them dear. On the plain outside, and around the captured wagons, at least thirty of their own lay dead upon the sand;

while a group here and there, bending over some recumbent form, told of a warrior wounded.

A band of twenty or thirty braves had gone in pursuit of the two whites who had escaped. Those who remained, at once set about collecting the corpses of their slain comrades, with the intent to inter them ; while the bodies of their butchered enemies were submitted to still farther mutilation. A resistance unexpected, causing them such grievous loss, had roused their vengeance to the point of exasperation ; and they could only expend it upon corpses. These were slashed and hacked with tomahawks, pierced with spears and arrows, beaten with war-clubs, and dragged at the tails of horses. It was a spectacle of fiendish spite—unlike anything that might be supposed to occur upon earth—only to be compared to a scene in the infernal regions, with demons for the *dramatis personæ*.

The party that had gone off in pursuit, after a time returned. They did not bring either captives or scalps ; but their report was satisfactory. They had followed the fugitives first to the upper

plain. They could not have escaped in that way, as they would have been seen for miles off, and there was not time for them to have retreated to such distance. They had then got upon the true trail, and found the hole in the rocks, where the two men must have taken shelter. No one had dared to go into it. That would have been like attacking a grizzly bear in its den. But they had sent down stones to do the deadly work; and if these failed, the smoke of the *ideodondo* must have finished it. To make sure, however, they had rolled a stone over the aperture of the cavern, closing it up for ever. Twenty men had laid their shoulders to it, and there was no fear that two could ever remove it from its place. Living or dead, the white men would never more be seen upon the earth.

So reported the returned party of pursuers.

A scene next ensued in which the grotesque and terrible were strangely commingled. The plunder of the wagons began, and with it the distribution of the goods. Some of these had been destroyed or damaged by the fires; but there was

still fifty thousand dollars' worth left to satisfy the cupidity of the spoilers. They consisted of assorted merchandise: some hardware, in the shape of knives, daggers, and pistols; some mirrors and bijouterie; but chiefly cotton-prints of attractive colours and patterns, along with a considerable quantity of silken stuffs and laces, for the dames of El Paso, Chihuahua, and Durango.

The partition was not equal to all. The goods, when taken out of the wagons, were first separated into three portions of like value. One of these was distributed in equal allotments to each of the common braves of the band. A second was reserved for the chief; while the third—by a sort of tacit consent, as if from previous understanding—became the property of a man who was neither a brave nor chief, but seemed to hold authority over both. This man differed from the others, not by the dress he wore—for he was in complete Indian costume—nor yet by the colour of his skin, for he was bronze-black like the rest. The distinction lay in his having hair on his face—in fact a full beard, with large side whiskers.

After all, this circumstance could not be considered so strange in a band of Comanche or Apache Indians, among whom there are many men with Spanish-American blood in their veins—some indeed Mexicans themselves—prisoners who from necessity have become affiliated to the tribe, or outlawed criminals, who, finding savage life congenial, have taken to it from choice.

There were two or three others among the captors of the caravan who also had hair upon their face, though none so fully furnished with the Caucasian sign of virility as the personage to whom was appropriated a share of the spoils equalling that of the chief.

The conduct of this man was in other respects signally mysterious. In the fight he had taken no part, standing at a safe distance as a spectator; or only now and then lending the aid of his counsel, imparted in muttered voice to the chief.

When the conflict was ended, and the caravan in possession of the victors, he had displayed more energy in assisting to extinguish the fires. This having been accomplished, he was seen to

stoop over the bodies of the whites who had fallen, passing from one to the other, and giving each an examination, as if in their ghastly features he expected to identify some old enemy. From all, however, one after the other, he seemed to turn away disappointed.

Another act on the part of this personage of like strange and mysterious seeming: after the pursuing party had returned and made report, as if to assure himself of its correctness, he started off toward the ravine up which the chase had gone. He entered the chine, clambering over the carcass of Wilder's horse, still there; and keeping on up the gorge, reached the platform penetrated by the shaft-like cavern. He saw where the huge boulder had been displaced from its bed; and after going around the rock, and on all sides examining it, as if to assure himself that the aperture was all covered, he stood for some time with a grim smile of satisfaction playing upon his savage features.

Then, giving an ejaculatory grunt, and muttering a word or two that sounded like Spanish,

he turned away from the spot, and retraced his steps to the plain. All this occurred before the partition of the spoils. When the distribution was complete, and each warrior had appropriated his own share, a new scene was enacted, in which the grotesque held a predominant share.

There was a barrel of Monangahela whisky in one of the wagons, still more than half filled with the white man's fire-water. It also was distributed, and soon found its way down the throats of the savages. Two-thirds of the band instantly became intoxicated. Some of them were dead drunk, and lay sleeping upon the sand. Others of stronger stomach or more excitable brain kept their feet, or rather did they forsake them by springing to the backs of their horses.

A sort of frenzied frolic seemed to seize hold of them. They forgot their slain comrades, yet unburied; and careering around at full gallop, with the scalps of the white men poised upon their spears, they whooped and shouted and laughed, till the cliffs echoed back the sounds of their demoniac mirth.

Some fastened the ends of pieces of cotton goods to the tails of their horses. Then spurred out upon the plain, till the pieces, unwinding themselves, flouted like streamers behind. Sometimes two horsemen would each take an end of the same piece, and tie it to the tail of his own steed. The two would then gallop in opposite directions, until the pluck came, and the strip of print would be torn apart, wherever it was weakest. He who held the larger share would be the winner, with the right to appropriate the whole piece.

It was an original species of gambling—a rare riot—a true saturnal of savages.





CHAPTER X.

A LIVING TOMB.

LITERALLY buried alive, as Walt Wilder had expressed it, were he and his companion.

They now understood what had caused the strange noise that mystified them—the rumbling followed by a crash. No accidental *débâcle* or falling of a portion of the cliff, as they had been half supposing ; but a deed of diabolical design—a huge rock rolled by the united strength of the savages, until it rested over the orifice of the shaft, completely coping and closing it.

It may have been done without any certain knowledge of their being inside—only to make things sure. It mattered not to the two men thus cruelly enclosed ; for they knew that in any

case there was no hope of their being rescued from what they now believed to be a living tomb.

That it was such, neither could doubt. The guide, gifted with a herculean strength, had tried to move the stone on discovering how it lay. With his feet firmly planted in the projections below, and his shoulder to the rock above, he had given a heave that would have lifted a loaded wagon from its wheels.

The stone did not budge with all this exertion. There was not so much as motion. He might as successfully have made trial to move a mountain from its base. He did not try again. He remembered the rock itself. He had noticed it while they were searching for a place to conceal themselves, and had been struck with its immense size. No one man could have stirred it from its place. It must have taken at least twenty Indians. No matter how many, they had succeeded in their design, and their victims were now helplessly enclosed in the dark catacomb—slowly, despairingly to perish.

‘All up wi’ us I reck’n,’ said the guide, as he

once more let himself down upon the ledge to communicate the particulars to his companion.

Hamersley ascended to see for himself. They could only go one at a time. He examined the edge of the orifice where the rock rested upon it. He could only do so by the touch. Not a ray of light came in on any side, and groping round and round he could detect neither crevice nor void. There were weeds and grass, still warm and smouldering, the débris of what had been set on fire for their fumigation. The rock rested on a bedding of these. Hence the exact fit, closing every crack and crevice.

On completing his exploration, Hamersley returned to his companion below.

‘Hopeless!’ muttered Wilder despondingly.

‘No, Walt, I don’t think so yet.’

The Kentuckian, though young, was a man of remarkable intelligence as well as courage. It needed these qualities to be a prairie merchant—one who commanded a caravan. Wilder knew him to be possessed of them—in the last of them equalling himself, in the first far excelling him.

‘You think thar’s a chance for us to git out o’ hyar?’ he said interrogatively.

‘I think there is; and a likely one.’

‘Good! What leads ye to think so, Frank?’

‘Reach me my bowie. It’s behind you there in the cave.’

Wilder did as requested.

‘It will depend a good deal upon what sort of rock this is around us. It isn’t flint, anyhow. I take it to be either lime or sandstone. If so, we needn’t stay here—much longer than it would be safe to go out again among those blood-thirsty savages.’

‘How do you mean, Frank? Darn me if I yet understan’ ye!’

‘It’s very simple, Walt. If this cliff rock be only sandstone, or some other substance equally soft, we may cut our way out—under the big stone.’

‘Ha! I didn’t think o’ thet. Thar’s good sense in that ye say.’

‘It has a softish feel,’ said the Kentuckian, as he drew his hand across one of the projecting points. ‘I wish I only had two inches of a

candle. However, I think I can make my exploration in the dark.'

There was a short moment of silence, after which was heard a clinking sound, as of a knife-blade being repeatedly struck against a stone. It was Hamersley with his bowie chipping off a piece from the rock, that projected from the side of the shaft.

The sound was pleasant to the Kentuckian's ear, for it was not the hard metallic ring given out by quartz or granite. On the contrary, the steel struck against it with a dull dead echo, and he could feel that the point of the knife easily impinged upon it.

'Sandstone,' he said, 'or something that 'll serve our purpose equally as well. Yes, Walt, there's a good chance for us to get out of this ugly prison; so keep up your heart, comrade. It may cost us a couple of days' quarrying. Perhaps all the better for that; the Indians are pretty sure to keep about the wagons for a day or so. They'll find enough there to amuse them. Our work will depend a good deal on what sort of

a stone they've rolled over the hole. You remember what size the boulder was ?'

' 'Twas a largish pebble ; looked to me least ten feet every way. It sort o' serprize me how the skunks ked a - budged it. I reck'n 'twar on a coggle, an' rolled eezy. It must a tuk the hul clanjamfry o' them.'

'If we only knew the right edge to begin at. For that we must go by guess-work. Well, we mustn't lose time, but set about our stone-cutting at once. Every hour will be taking the strength out of us. I only came down for the bowie to make beginning. I'll make trial at it first, and then we take turn and turn about.'

Provided with his knife, the Kentuckian again climbed up ; and soon after, the guide heard a crinkling sound, succeeded by the rattling of pieces of rock, as they got detached and came showering down.

To save his crown, now uncovered by the loss of both kerchief and cap, he crept back into the alcove that had originally protected them from the stones cast in by the Indians. Along with

the splinters something else came past Walt's face, making a soft rustling sound; it had a smell also, that told what it was—the 'cussed stink-weed.'

From the falling fragments, their size and number, he could tell that his comrade was making good way.

Walt longed to relieve him at his work, and called up a request to this end; but Hamersley returned a refusal, speaking in a cautious tone, lest his voice might be borne out to the ear of some savage still lingering near.

For over an hour Wilder waited below, now and then casting impatient glances upward. They were only mechanical; for of course he could see nothing. But they were anxious withal, for the success of his comrade's scheme was yet problematical.

With sufficient food and drink to sustain them, they might in time accomplish what they had set about; but wanting these, their strength would soon give way, and then—ah! then—

The guide was still standing on the ledge, pur-

suing this or a similar train of reflection, when all at once a sight came, not under but above his eyes, which caused him to utter an exclamation of joy.

It was the sight of his comrade's face—only that!

But this had in it a world of significance. He could not have seen that face without *light*. Light had been let into their rock-bound abode, so late buried in the profoundest darkness.

It was but a feeble glimmer, that appeared to have found admission through a tiny crevice under the huge copestone; and Hamersley's face, close to it, was seen only in faint shadow—fainter from the film of smoke yet struggling up the shaft.

Still was it light—beautiful cheering light—like some shore-beacon seen by the storm-tossed mariner amid the dangers of a night-shrouded sea.

Hamersley had not yet spoken word to explain what had occurred to cause it. He had suddenly left off chipping the rock, and was at rest, apparently in contemplation of the soft silvery ray that was playing so benignly upon his features.

Was it the pleasure of once more beholding what he late thought he might never see again—the light of day? Was it this alone that was keeping him still and speechless?

No, something else; as he told his comrade when he rejoined him soon after on the ledge.

‘Walt,’ he said, ‘I’ve let daylight in, as you see; but I find it’ll take a long time to cut a passage out. It’s only the weeds I’ve been able to get clear of. The big rock runs over at least five feet, and the stone turns out harder than I thought for.’

These were not cheering words to Walt Wilder.

‘But,’ continued Hamersley, his speech changing to a more hopeful tone, ‘I’ve noticed something that may serve better still; perhaps save us all the quarrying. I don’t know whether I’m right; but we shall soon see.’

‘What hev ye noticed?’ was the question put by Wilder.

‘You see there’s still some smoke around us.’

‘Yes, Frank, my eyes tell me that plain enuf. I’ve nigh rubbed ’em out o’ thar sockets.’

‘Well, as soon as I had scooped out the crack that let in the daylight, I noticed that the smoke rushed out as if blasted through a pair of bellows. That shows there’s a draught coming up. It can only come from some aperture below, acting as a furnace or the funnel of a chimney. We must try to get down to the bottom, and see if there’s such a thing. If there be, who knows but it may be big enough to let us out of our prison, without having to carve our way through the walls; which, I feel certain, would take us several days. We must try to get down to the bottom.’

To accede to this request the guide needed no urging; and both—one after the other—at once commenced descending.

They found no great difficulty in getting down, any more than they had already experienced; for the shaft continued all the way of nearly the same width, and very similar to what it was above the ledge. Near the bottom, however, it became abruptly wider by the recession of the walls. They were now in a dilemma; for they had reached a point where they could go no farther without

dropping off. It might be ten feet—it might be a hundred; in any case enough to make the peril appalling.

Wilder had gone first, and soon bethought himself of a test. He unslung his powder-horn, and permitted it to drop from his hand, listening attentively. It made scarce any noise; still he could hear it striking against something soft. It was the brush thrown in by the Indians. This did not seem far below; and the half-burnt stalks would be something to break their fall.

‘I’ll chance it,’ said Walt; and almost simultaneous with his words was heard the bump of his heavy body alighting on the litter below.

‘Ye may jump without fear, Frank. ’Tain’t over six feet in the clar.’

Hamersley obeyed, and soon both stood at the bottom of the chimney—on the hearthstone where the stalks of the creosote still smouldered.



CHAPTER XI.

OFF AT LAST.

ON touching *terra firma*, and finding plenty of space around, they scrambled from off the pile of loose stones and stalks cast down by the Indians, and commenced groping their way about. Again touching the firm surrounding of rock, they groped searchingly along it.

They were not long engaged in their game of blind-man's buff, when the necessity of trusting to the touch came abruptly to an end—as if the handkerchief had been suddenly jerked from their eyes. The change was caused by a light streaming in through a side gallery into which they had strayed. It was at first dim and distant, but soon shone upon them with the brilliance of a flambeau.

Following the passage through which it guided

them, they reached an aperture of irregular roundish shape, about the size of the cloister window of a convent. They saw at once that it was big enough to allow the passage of their bodies. They saw too that it was admitting the sunbeams—admonishing them that it was still far from night.

They had brought all their traps down along with them—their knives and pistols, with Hamersley's gun still carefully kept. But they hesitated about going out. There could be no difficulty in their doing so; for there was a ledge less than three feet under the aperture, upon which they could find footing. It was not that which caused them to hesitate, but the fear of again falling into the hands of their implacable enemies.

That these were still upon the plain they had evidence. They could hear their yells and whooping, mingled with peals of wild demon-like laughter. It was at the time when the fire-water was in the ascendant, and the savages were playing their merry game with the pieces of despoiled cotton goods.

There was danger in going out, but there might

be more in staying in. The savages might return upon their search, and discover this other entrance to the vault. In that case they would take still greater pains to close it, and besiege the two fugitives to the point of starvation.

Both were eager to escape from a place they had lately looked upon as a living tomb.

Still they dared not venture out of it. They could not retreat by the plain, so long as the Indians were upon it. At night perhaps, in the darkness, they might? Hamersley suggested this.

‘No,’ said Walt, ‘nor at night eyther. It’s moon-time, you know; an’ them sharp-eyed Injuns niver all goes to sleep thegither. On that sand they’d see us in the moonlight, ’most as plain as in the day. Ef we wait at all, we’ll hev to stay till they go clar off.’

Wilder, while speaking, stood close to the aperture, looking cautiously out. At that moment craning his neck to a greater stretch, so as to command a better view of what lay below, his eye caught sight of an object that elicited an exclamation of surprise.

‘Darn it!’ he said, ‘thar’s my old clout lyin’ down thar on the rocks.’

It was the red kerchief he had plucked from his head to put the pursuers on the wrong track.

‘It’s jest war I flinged it,’ he continued; ‘I kin recognise the place. That gully, then, must be the one we didn’t go up.’

Walt spoke the truth. The decoy was still in the place where he had set it. The square of soiled and faded cotton had failed to tempt the cupidity of the savages, who knew that in the wagons they had captured were hundreds of such, clean and new—with far richer spoil besides.

‘S’pose we still try thet path, Frank. It may lead us to the top arter all. If they’ve been up it, they’ve long ago gone down agin; I kin tell by thar yelpin’ around the wagons. They’ve got holt o’ our *corn* afore this; an’ won’t be so sharp in lookin’ arter us.’

‘Agreed,’ said Hamersley.

Without farther delay the two scrambled out through the aperture, and creeping along the ledge, once more stood in the hollow of the ravine, at

the point of its separation into the forks that had perplexed them in their ascent. Perhaps, after all, they had chosen the right one. At the time of their first flight, had they succeeded in reaching the plain above, they would surely have been seen and pursued; though with superior swiftness of foot they might still have escaped.

Once more they faced upward, by the slope of the ravine yet untried.

On passing it, Walt laid hold of his 'clout' as he called it, and replaced it turban fashion on his head.

'I only weesh,' he said, 'I ked as convenient rekiver my rifle; an' darn me, but I would try ef it war only thar still. It ain't, I know. Thet air piece is too preecious for a Injun to pass it. It's gone back to the wagons.'

They could now more distinctly hear the shouts of their despoilers; and as they continued the ascent, the rent or chine in the cliff opened between them and the plain, giving them a glimpse of what was there going on.

They could see the savages—some on foot,

others on horseback—the latter careering round, as if engaged in a tournament, trailing like ribbons behind their horses long strips of cotton prints, the produce of the mills of Lowell and Manchester.

They saw they were roistering, wild with triumph, and maddened with drink—the fire-water they had found in the wagons.

‘Though they be drunk, we mustn’t stay hyar so nigh ’em,’ muttered Walt. ‘I allers like to put space atween me an’ sech as them. They mout git some whimsey into their heads, an’ come this ways. They’ll take any amount o’ trouble to raise har; and they may be grievin’ thet they hain’t got ourn yit, an’ mout think they’d hev another try for it. As the night’s boun’ to be a mooner, we can’t git too far from ’em. So let’s on as quick’s we kin.’

‘On, then!’ said Hamersley, assenting; and the next moment the two were rapidly ascending the gorge; Wilder leading the way.

This time they were more fortunate. The ravine sloped on up to the summit of the cliff,

debouching upon a level plain. They reached this without passing any point that could bring them under the eyes of the Indians.

They could still hear the shouts of triumph and wild revelry; but as they receded from the crest of the cliff, these grew fainter and fainter, until they found themselves fleeing over an open tableland, bounded above by the sky, all around them still as death—*still as the heart of a desert.*





CHAPTER XII.

THE DEPARTURE OF THE PLUNDERERS.

ON the day after the capture of the caravan, the Indians, having consumed all the whisky found in the wagons, and become comparatively sober, prepared to move off.

The captured goods, made up into convenient parcels, were packed upon mules and spare horses, of which they had plenty, having come prepared for such a sequel to their attack upon the travellers.

The warriors having given interment to their dead comrades, leaving the scalped and mutilated corpses of the white men to the vultures and wolves, mounted and marched off.

Before leaving the scene of the sanguinary exploit, they had drawn the wagons into a close clump, and set fire to them ; partly from a wanton

instinct of destruction ; partly from the pleasure of beholding a great bonfire ; but also with some thought that it might be as well thus to blot out all the traces of a tragedy, for which the Americans—of whom even these freebooters felt dread—might some day call them to account.

They did not all go together, but separated into two parties on the spot where they had passed the night. They were parties, however, of very unequal size, one of them numbering only four individuals.

The other, which constituted the main body of the plunderers, was, as Walt Wilder had rightly conjectured, a band of the middle Comanches, known as the Tenawas, under their chief the Horned Lizard. These turning eastward struck off towards the head waters of the Big Wichita, upon which and its tributaries lie their customary roving-grounds.

The lesser party went off in almost the opposite direction, south-westerly, leaving the Llano Estacado on their left ; and journeying on, crossed the Rio Pecos at a point below and outside

the farthest frontier settlement of New Mexico towards the prairies. Then, shaping their course nearly due south, they skirted the spurs of the Sierra Blanca, that in this latitude extend east towards the Pecos.

On arriving near the place known as Gran Quivira—where once stood a prosperous Spanish town devoted to gathering gold, now only a ruin, scarce traceable, and altogether without record—they again changed their course, almost zigzagging back in a north-westerly direction. They were making towards a depression seen in the Sierra Blanca, as if with the intention to cross the mountains toward the valley of the Del Norte. They might have reached the valley without this circumambience—by a trail well known and often travelled. But it appeared as if this was just what they desired to avoid.

One of the men composing this party was he already remarked upon as having a large beard and whiskers. A second was one of those spoken of as more slightly furnished with these appendages; while the other two were beardless.

All four were of deep bronze complexion, and to all appearance pure-blooded aborigines. That the two with hirsute sign spoke to one another in Spanish was no sure evidence of their not being Indians. It was within the limits of New Mexican territory, where there are many Indians who converse in Castilian, as an ordinary language.

He with the whiskered cheeks, the chief of the quartette, as well as the tallest of them, had not left behind the share of the plunder that had been allotted to him. It was still in his train, borne on the backs of seven strong mules heavily loaded. These formed an *atajo*, or pack-train, guided and driven by the two beardless men of the party, who seemed to understand mule-driving as thoroughly as if they had been trained to the calling of the *arriero*—and perhaps so had they been.

The other two took no trouble with the pack-animals, but rode on in front, conversing *sans souci*, and in a somewhat jocular vein.

The heavily-bearded man was astride a splendid black horse; not a Mexican mustang, like that of his companions, but a large sinewy animal, that

showed the breed of Kentucky. And so should he—since he was the same steed Frank Hamersley had been compelled to leave behind in that rapid rush into the crevice of the cliff.

‘This time, Roblez, we’ve made a pretty fair haul of it,’ remarked he who bestrode the black. ‘What with the silks and laces—to say nothing of this splendid mount between my legs—I think I may say that our time has not been thrown away.’

‘Yours hasn’t, anyhow. My share won’t be much.’

‘Come, come, *teniente!* don’t talk in that way. You should be satisfied with a share proportioned to your rank. Besides, you must remember the man who puts down the stake has the right to draw the winnings. But for me there would have been no spoils to share. Isn’t it so?’

This truth seeming to produce an impression on Roblez’ mind, he made response in the affirmative.

‘Well, I’m glad you acknowledge it,’ pursued the rider of the black. ‘Let there be no disputes between us; for you know, Roblez, we can’t

afford to quarrel. You shall have a liberal percentage on this lucky venture; I promise it. By the bye, how much do you think the plunder ought to realise ?

‘ Well,’ responded Roblez, restored to a cheerful humour, ‘ if properly disposed of in El Paso or Chihuahua, the lot ought to fetch from fifteen to twenty thousand dollars. I see some silk-velvet among the stuff that would sell high, if you could get it shown to the rich damsels of Durango or Zacatecas. - One thing sure, you’ve got a good third of the caravan stock.’

‘ Ha ! ha ! More than half of it, in value. The Horned Lizard went in for *bulk*. I let him have it to his heart’s content. He thinks more of those cheap cotton prints, with their red and green and yellow flowers, than all the silk ever spun since the days of Mother Eve. Ha ! ha ! ha !’

The laugh, in which Roblez heartily joined, was still echoing on the air as the two horsemen entered a pass leading through the mountains. It was the depression in the sierra, seen shortly

after parting with the Horned Lizard and his band. It was a pass rugged with rock, and almost trackless, here and there winding about, and sometimes continued through cañons or clefts barely wide enough to give way to the mules with the loads upon their backs.

For all this the animals of the travellers seemed to journey along it without difficulty; only the American horse showing signs of awkwardness. All the others went as if they had trodden it before.

For several hours they kept on through this series of cañons and gorges—here and there crossing a transverse ridge, that, cutting off a bend, shortened the distance.

Just before sunset the party came to a halt; not in the defile itself, but in one of still more rugged aspect that led laterally into the side of the mountain. In this there was no trace or sign of travel—no appearance of its having ever been entered by man or animal.

Yet the horse ridden by Roblez, and the pack-mules coming after, entered with as free a step as

if going into a well-known enclosure. True, the chief of the party, mounted on the Kentucky steed, had gone in before them ; though this scarce accounted for their confidence.

Up this unknown gorge they rode, until they had reached its end. There was no outlet, for it was a *cul-de-sac*—a natural court—such as are often found among the amygdaloidal mountains of Mexico.

At its extremity, where it narrowed to a width of about fifty feet, lay a huge boulder of granite that appeared to block up the path ; though there was a clear space between it and the cliff rising vertically behind it.

The obstruction was only apparent, and did not cause the leading savage of the party to make even a temporary stop. At one side there was an opening large enough to permit the passage of a horse ; and into this he rode, Roblez following, and also the mules in a string, one after the other.

Behind the boulder was an open space of a few square yards, of extent sufficient to allow room for turning a horse. The savage chief

wheeled his steed, and headed him direct for the cliff; not with the design of dashing his brains against the rock, but to force him into a cavern, whose entrance showed its disk in the façade of the precipice, dark and dismal as the door of an Inquisitorial prison.

The horse snorted, and shied back; but the ponderous Mexican spur, with its long sharp rowel-points, soon drove him in; whither he was followed by the mustang of Roblez and the mules—the latter going in as unconcernedly as if entering a stable whose stalls were familiar to them.





CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE TRANSFORMATION.

It was well on in the afternoon of the following day before the four spoil-laden savages, who had sought shelter in the cave, again showed themselves outside. Then came they filing forth, one after the other, in the same order as they had entered; but so changed in appearance, that no one seeing them come out of the cavern could by any possibility have recognised them as the same men who had the night before gone into it. Even their animals had undergone some transformation. The horses were differently caparisoned; the flat American saddle having been removed from the back of the grand Kentucky steed, and replaced by the deep-tree Mexican *silla*, with its *corona* of stamped leather and wooden *estribos*. The mules,

too, were rigged in a different manner ; each having the regular *alpareja* or pack-saddle, with the broad *apishamores* breeched upon its hips ; while the spoils, no longer in loose carelessly tied-up bundles, were made up into neat packs, as goods in regular transportation by an *atajo*.

The two men who conducted them had altogether a changed appearance. Their skins were still of the same colour—the pure bronze-black of the Indian—but, instead of the eagle's feathers late sticking up above their crowns, both had their heads now covered with simple straw hats ; while sleeveless coats of coarse woollen stuff, with stripes running transversely—*tilmas*—shrouded their shoulders, their limbs having free play in white cotton drawers of ample width. A leathern belt, and apron of reddish-coloured sheepskin, tanned, completed the costume of an *arriero* of the humbler class—the *mozo* or assistant.

But the change in the two other men—the chief and him addressed as Roblez—was of a far more striking kind. They had entered the cave as Indians, warriors of the first rank, plumed,

painted, and adorned with all the devices and insignia of savage heraldry. They came out of it as white men, wearing the costume of well-to-do rancheros—or rather that of town-traders—broad glazed hats upon their heads, cloth jackets and trousers, the latter having the seats and inside of the legs fended with a lining of stamped leather. Boots with heavy spurs upon their feet, crape sashes around the waist, machetés strapped along the flaps of their saddles, and serapés resting folded over the croup, gave the finishing touch to their travelling equipment. These, with the well-appointed *atajo* of mules, made the party one of peaceful merchants transporting their merchandise from town to town.

On coming out of the cave, the leader, looking fresh and bright from his change of toilet and the late purification of his skin, glanced up toward the sky, as if to consult the sun as to the hour. At the same time he drew a gold watch from his vest-pocket, and looked also at that.

‘We’ll be just in the right time, Roblez,’ he said. ‘Six hours yet before sunset. That will

get us out into the valley, and in the river road. We're not likely to meet any one after nightfall in these days of Indian alarms. Four more will bring us to Albuquerque, long after the sleepy townfolks have gone to bed. We've let it go late enough anyhow, and mustn't delay here any longer. Look well to your mules, *mozos* ! *Vamonos* !'

At the word all started together down the gorge, the speaker as before leading the way, Roblez next, and the *mozos* with their laden mules stringing out in the rear.

Soon after, they reëntered the mountain defile, and once more heading north-westward, silently continued on for the valley of the Rio del Norte. Their road, as before, led tortuously through cañons and rugged ravines ; no road at all, but a mere bridle-path, faintly indicated by the previous passage of an occasional wayfarer, or the tracks of straying cattle.

The sun was just sinking over the far western cordilleras when the precipitous walls of the Sierra Blanca, opening wider on each side of the defile, disclosed to the spoil-laden party a view of the

broad level plain known as the valley of the Del Norte.

Soon after, they had descended to it; and in the midst of night, with a starry sky overhead, were traversing the level road upon which the broad wheel-tracks of rude country carts—*carretas*—told of the proximity of settlements. It was a country road, leading out from the foot-hills of the sierra to a crossing of the river, near the village of Tomé, where it intersected with the main route of travel running from El Paso in the south through all the riverine towns of New Mexico.

Turning northward from Tomé, the white robbers, late disguised as Indians, pursued their course towards the town of Albuquerque. Any one meeting them on the road would have mistaken them for a party of traders *en route* from the Rio Abajo to the capital of Santa Fé.

But they went not so far. Albuquerque was the goal of their journey; though on arriving there—which they did a little after midnight—they made no stop in the town, nor any noise to disturb its inhabitants, at that hour asleep.

Passing silently through the unpaved streets, they kept on a little farther. A large house or *hacienda*, tree-shaded, and standing outside the suburbs, was the stopping-place they were aiming at; and towards this they directed their course. There was a *mirador* or belvidere upon the roof—the same beside which Colonel Miranda and his American guest, just twelve months before, had stood smoking their cigars.

As then, there was a guard of soldiers within the covered entrance, with a sentry outside the gate. He was leaning against the postern, his form in the darkness just distinguishable against the gray-white of the wall.

‘*Quien viva ?*’ he hailed as the two horsemen rode up, the hoof-strokes startling him out of a half-drunken doze.

‘*El coronel-commandante !*’ responded the tall man in a tone that told of authority.

It proved to be countersign sufficient, the speaker’s voice being instantly recognised.

The sentry, bringing his piece to the salute, permitted the horsemen to pass without farther

parley, as also the *atajo* in their train ; all entering and disappearing within the dark doorway, just as they had made entrance into the mouth of the mountain cavern.

While listening to the hoof-strokes of the animals ringing on the pavement of the *patio* inside, the sentinel had his reflections and conjectures. He wondered where the Colonel Commandante could have been to keep him so long absent from his command—and he had perhaps other conjectures of an equally perplexing nature. They did not much trouble him, however. What mattered it to him how the Commandant employed his time, or where it was spent, so long as he got his *sueldo* and rations? He had them with due regularity ; and with this consoling reflection he wrapped his yellow cloak around him, leaned against the wall, and soon after succumbed to the state of semi-watchfulness from which the unexpected advent had aroused him.

‘ Carrambo ! ’ exclaimed the Colonel to his subordinate, when, after looking to the stowage of the plunder, the two men sat together in a well-fur-

nished apartment of the hacienda, with a table, decanters, and glasses between them. 'It's been a long tedious tramp, hasn't it? Well, we've not wasted our time, nor had our toil for nothing. Come, *teniente!* fill your glass again, and let us drink to our commercial adventure. Here's, that in the disposal of our goods we may be as successful as in their purchase!'

Right merrily the lieutenant refilled his glass, and responded to the toast of his superior officer.

'I suspect, Roblez,' continued the colonel, 'that you have been all the while wondering how I came to know about this caravan whose spoil is to enrich us—its route, the exact time of its arrival, the strength of its defenders—everything? You think our friend the Horned Lizard gave me all this information?'

'No, I don't; since that could not well be. How was Horned Lizard to know himself—that is, in time to have sent word to you? In truth, *mio coronel*, I am, as you say, in a quandary about all that. I cannot even guess at the explanation.'

'This would give it to you, if you could read;

but I know you cannot, *mio teniente* ; your education has been sadly neglected. Never mind, I shall read it for you.'

As the colonel was speaking, he had taken from the drawer of an escritorio that stood close by, a sheet of paper folded in the form of a letter. It was one, though it bore no postmark. For all that, it looked as if it had travelled far—perchance carried by hand. It had in truth come all the way across the prairies. Its superscription was :

'EL CORONEL MIRANDA, COMANDANTE DEL
DISTRITO MILITARIO DE ALBUQUERQUE,
NUEVO MEXICO.'

Its contents, also in Spanish, translated read thus :

'*My dear Colonel Miranda,—I am about to carry out the promise made to you at our parting. I have my mercantile enterprise in a forward state of readiness for a start over the plains. My caravan will not be a large one, about six or seven wagons with less than a score of men ; but the goods I take are valuable, in an inverse ratio to their bulk—designed for the "ricos" of your*

country. I intend taking departure from the frontier town of Van Buren, in the State of Arkansas, and shall go by a new route lately discovered by one of our prairie traders, that leads part way along the Canadian river, by you called “Rio de la Cañada,” and skirting the great plain of the Llano Estacado at its upper end. This southern route makes us more independent of the season, so that I shall be able to travel in the fall. If nothing occur to delay me in the route, I shall reach New Mexico about the middle of November, when I anticipate renewing those relations of a pleasant friendship, in which you have been all the giver, and I all the receiver.

I send this by one of the spring caravans starting from Independence for Santa Fé, in the hope that it will safely reach you.—I subscribe myself, dear Colonel Miranda,

Your grateful friend,

FRANCIS HAMERSLEY.’

‘Well, *teniente*,’ said his colonel, as he refolded the far-fetched epistle, and returned it to

the escritorio, 'do you comprehend matters any clearer, now?'

'Clear as the sun that shines over the Llano Estacado,' was the reply of the lieutenant, whose admiration for the executive qualities of his superior officer, along with the bumpers he had imbibed, had now exalted his fancy to a poetical elevation. '*Carrai-i! Esta un golpe magnifico!* (It's a splendid stroke!) worthy of Manuel Armigo himself—or even the great Santa Anna.'

'A greater stroke than you yet think it, for it is double—two birds killed with the same stone. Let us again drink to it!'

The glasses were once more filled; and once more did the associated bandits toast to the nefarious enterprise they had so successfully accomplished.

Then Roblez rose to go to the *cuartel* or barracks, where he had his place of sleeping and abode, bidding *buena noche* to his colonel.

The latter also bethought him of bed; and taking a lamp from the table, commenced moving towards his *cuarto de camara*.

On coming opposite a picture suspended against the *sala* wall—the portrait of a beautiful girl—he stopped in front, for a moment gazed upon it, and then into a mirror that stood close by.

As if there was something in the glass that reflected its shadow into his very soul, the expression of exultant triumph, so late depicted upon his face, was all at once swept from it, giving place to a look of blank bitterness.

‘One is gone,’ he said, in a half-muttered soliloquy; ‘one part of the stain wiped out—thanks to the Holy Virgin for that. But the other; and *she*—where, where?’

And with these words he staggered on towards his chamber.





CHAPTER XIV.

THE STAKED PLAIN.

SPREAD before you a map of prairie-land—and I will point out the tract of territory known as the ‘Llano Estacado,’ or Staked Plain.

It must be a map of modern time, based on the latest explorations; else you will have some difficulty in comprehending the limits assigned to this singular, and yet almost unexplored district of country. A prairie-chart of even less than a quarter of a century ago will show it traversed by a series of parallel streams, the head-waters of the Red River of Louisiana, the Brazos of Texas—as also the numerous tributaries of the Texan Colorado. It is true that these rivers *head* on the Staked Plain, but none of them run across it. They have their sources within it, debouching

from its eastern edge, that boldly bluffs upon the great plain of Texas by an escarpment running continuous for hundreds of miles. A strip on its eastern side is intersected by deep clefts or *canons*, cut by the numerous streams as they work their way to the outer and lower tableland of Texas.

The misconception long held in regard to the sources of the Louisiana Red, as also the large rivers of Texas, was natural enough. The early explorers of the Western territory had traced the more northern prairie streams up to the main cordillera of the Sierra Madre (mother chain), known to them as the Stony or Rocky Mountains. The Missouri, the Platte, and the Arkansas, headed there; and Pike, misled by a similarity of name, explored the prairie (not the Texan) Colorado to its source in the vertebral chain, believing it to be the Red River of Louisiana. It is now known to be a tributary of the Arkansas; while the head-waters of the real Red have been found farther to the south, not springing from the Rocky Mountains at all, but from the *ceja* of the Staked Plain, two hundred miles to the eastward.

Pike's Colorado—the Goo-al-pah of the Indians—now more commonly called Canadian (another misnomer, due to a misapprehension of the Spanish phrase *Rio de la Cañada*, or 'River of the cañon'), will give a good idea of the position of the Staked Plain. It is usually assumed as the northern boundary of this desert tract; though, speaking in a strict geological sense, it is not so: since the elevated tableland thus designated extends for a considerable distance north of the Canadian; and it is in fact the intersection of a portion of it that causes the great *cañon* from which this river has derived its Spanish name.

Taking the Canadian, however, as its northern boundary, we have the Staked Plain running longitudinally southward through several degrees of latitude, showing almost a precipitous front—or *ceja*, as called by the Spanish Americans—to the champaign country of Texas. It narrows towards its southern extremity; there giving source to the Leona, Nueces, and other head-streams of the Texan Colorado.

On the west its limits are more definitely

drawn ; the Pecos river—itsself having source very near the Canadian—running close to and nearly parallel with its western edge.

This is also subject to an exceptional remark : that the valley, or bottom of the Pecos, is but a portion of the tableland hollowed out by rain and river erosion. Taking this view, the Staked Plain may be regarded as a part of the upland plateaux stretching eastward from the Sierra Madre (Sierra Blanca and Los Organos) ; thus isolated from the tablelands lying more immediately among, and enclosed by, cordilleras of the mountains.

In any case, the Staked Plain rises above the surrounding country, with a well-marked boundary—either a precipitous slope or a sheer escarpment. Its elevation has been variously stated from five hundred to two thousand feet—the diversity of statements due partly to guess estimates, and partly to its having been viewed at different points. Eight hundred feet will be about the average height of its surface above the surrounding prairies—these again having about twice this elevation above the level of the sea.

Contrary to the general belief, there are hills and mountain-groups on the Staked Plain, that rise considerably higher than the ordinary level of its surface. As it has a superficial area as large as that of England, and has been only explored by a transverse crossing at two points widely apart, it will not seem strange that these mountain-groups have, till a late period, escaped observation.

A portion of this singular territory belongs to the great gypsum formation of the South-Western prairies, perhaps the largest in the world—while a highly-coloured sandstone of varied hues, and sometimes ferruginous, forms a conspicuous feature in its cliffs. Primitive rock will be found in its mountain-groups. Its surface, however, is for the most part a level plain, sterile as the desert, in places smooth and hard as a macadamised road ; though in other places indented with deep fissures (*barrancas*), apparently the work of water.

These often yawn open at the feet of the traveller ; giving neither sign nor warning of their proximity, until he stands upon the edge of a

precipitous escarpment opening hundreds of feet into the earth. In their beds may be seen loose boulders, piled upon one another in chaotic confusion, as if they had been flung there by the hands of giants; trunks of trees, too, in a state of fossilisation, like those seen by Darwin on the eastern declivity of the South American Andes.

Near its southern end there is a group of *medanos* or sand-hills, covering several hundred square miles of surface, and still drifting about as the dunes on the shores of a sea. A fact stranger still: high up amid the summits of these sand-hills is a lakelet or pond of pure drinking-water, though not a drop can be found upon the plain itself for scores of miles from the place. Sedge and lilies grow in and around this tarn, so singularly situated.

Nearly all the streams that head in the Staked Plain cut deep cañons in their way to the outer and lower level. These are often impassable, either transversely or along their channels. Sometimes, however, their beds are worn out into little valleys or 'coves'—in which a luxuriant vegeta-

tion finds shelter and a congenial soil. There flourish the pecan, the hackberry, the black walnut, the wild China, with evergreen oaks, plums, and clustering grape-vines; while in the sterile plain above are only seen those forms of the botanical world that truly indicate the desert—various species of *cactaceæ*, *agaves*, and *yuccas*—the *palmilla* and *lechuguilla*, dwarf-cedars and mezquites, artemisia, and the strong-smelling *larrea*, or ‘creosote plant.’

Animals are rare upon the Staked Plain; although the prong-horn antelope—true denizen of the desert—is there found, as also its enemy the Mexican jackal or *coyoté*. To the rattlesnake and horned lizard (*agama*) it is a congenial home; and the singular snake-bird—*paisano*—may frequently be seen running over the sterile waste, or skulking through the tortuous stems of the nopals. In the cañons of the streams the grizzly bear makes his haunt; and in times not long past it was ascended and traversed by the unwieldy buffalo. The wild horse still occasionally courses across it.

Of all living things, it is least frequented by man. Even the Indian rarely strays into its solitudes; and the white man, when called upon to enter them, does so with fear and trembling: for he knows there is danger.

This is chiefly due to the absence of water; but there is also the chance of going astray, and getting lost for the want of landmarks. To get lost in a wilderness of any kind is a dangerous predicament for a traveller—but in one with neither grass nor water it is death.

The Staked Plain extends longitudinally between what in Hispano-Mexican times were the provinces of Nuevo Mexico and Texas, having for their respective capitals Santa Fé and San Antonio de Bejar. Between these there was a necessary intercourse, both of a commercial and military character. This was carried on by a route that runs in slanting direction across the Staked Plain, a little to the north of its centre, striking on the Texan side the head-waters of the Colorado. To avoid straying from what the desert drift prevented from becoming a *trace*, the viceregal go-

vernment took the precaution to have posts or stakes set up, at such distances apart as to be visible from one another.

Hence the name of this strange tract—*El Llano Estacado*, or the ‘Staked Plain’—a title it is likely to bear to the end of time, as well as the trackless sterility which was the cause of its being bestowed.





CHAPTER XV.

INTO THE DESERT.

THE place where the American caravan had been attacked was in the bed of a dry water-course, resembling a sand plain. In time of rain only was there water in it, when it became a confluent of the Goo-al-pah or Canadian river. Directly over it frowned the precipitous cliff, up which the young prairie merchant and his guide, after their series of hair-breadth escapes, had succeeded in climbing. It was the scarped edge of a spur of the Staked Plain ; and it was into this sterile tract they were now fleeing.

Neither had any definite knowledge of the land that lay before them, nor the direction they should

take. Their only thought was to put space between themselves and the scene of their disaster; enough to secure them against being seen by the eye of any Indian coming after.

A glance was sufficient to satisfy them that only by distance could they obtain concealment. Far as the eye could reach, the surface appeared a perfect level, without shrub or tree. There was not cover enough to give hiding-place to a hare. Although now in full run, and with no appearance of being pursued, they were far from being confident of escaping. They had the apprehension that some of the savages had ascended to the upper plain, and were still upon it, searching for them. If so, though now out of sight, these might be encountered at any moment, returning disappointed from the chase.

The fugitives drew some consolation from the knowledge, that the pursuers could not have got their horses up the cliff; and, if there was to be another chapter to the chase, it would be on foot—a contest of pedestrian speed. In a trial of this kind, Walt Wilder at least had nothing to fear.

The Colossus with his long strides would have been almost a match for the giant with the seven-league boots.

His only uneasiness was that the savages might have gone out upon the track they were themselves taking, and, appearing in their front, might head them off, and so intercept their retreat. As there was yet no savage in sight—no sign either of man or animal—their confidence increased; and when they had made a mile or so across the plain, they no longer looked ahead, but backwards.

At short intervals the great brown beard of the guide swept over his left shoulder, as he cast anxious glances behind him. They were all the more anxious on observing—which he now did—that his fellow-fugitive flagged in his pace, and showed signs of giving out.

With a quick comprehension, and without any questions asked, Wilder understood the reason. In the smoke-cloud that had covered their retreat from the corralled wagons, and afterwards in the sombre shadow of the chine and the deep darkness

of the cave, he had not observed what now, in the bright glare of the sun, was too plainly apparent—that the garments of his comrade were saturated with blood !

Hamersley had scarce noticed it himself, and his attention was now called to it, less from perceiving any acute pain, than that he began to feel faint and feeble. Blood was oozing through the breast of his shirt, running down the legs of his pantaloons, and on over his boots. And the fountain from which it proceeded was fast disclosing itself by an aching pain in his side, that increased as he kept on.

A moment's pause to examine it. When the vest and shirt were torn aside, it was seen that a bullet had passed through his left side, causing only a flesh-wound, but cutting an artery in its course. Scratched and cut in several other places, for the time equally as painful, he had not yet given heed to this more serious wound.

It was not mortal, nor likely to prove so. The guide and hunter—like most of his calling—was a rough practical surgeon ; and after giving it a

hurried examination, pronounced it 'only a scratch,' and urged his companion onward.

Again starting, they proceeded at the same quick pace ; but before they had made another mile, the wounded man felt his weakness again overcoming him ; and the rapid run was succeeded by a slow dog-trot, soon after decreasing to a walk, and at length ending in a dead stop.

'I can go no farther, Walt ; not if all the devils of hell were at my heels. I've done my best. If they should come after, you keep on, and leave me.'

'Niver, Frank Hamersley, niver ! Walt Wilder ain't the man to sep'rate from a kimrade, and leave him in a fix that way. If you must pull up, so do this child. An' I see ye must ; thar's no behelp for it.'

'I could not go a step farther.'

'Enuf ! But don't let's stan' to be seen miles off. Squat's the word. Down on yer belly, like a toad under a harrer. Thar's jest a resemblance o' kiver, hyar 'mong these tussocks o' buffler-grass ; an' this child ain't the most inconspicrousest

object on this plain. Let's down on our breast-ribs, an' lay flat as pancakes.'

Hamersley, already tottering, dropped down by his side; as he did so, leaving the plain, far as the eye could reach, without salient object to intercept the vision—any more than might have been seen on the surface of a sleeping ocean.

It was in favour of the fugitives that the day had now well declined; and they had not remained long before the sun, sinking behind the western horizon, gave them an opportunity of once more getting upon their feet.

They did so, glad to escape from a position whose restraint had become exceedingly irksome. They had suffered from the hot atmosphere rising like caloric from the parched plain. But now that the sun had gone down, a cool breeze began to play over its surface, fanning them to a fresh energy. Besides, the night closing over them, and the moon not yet up, had removed the necessity for lying any longer in concealment, and they could proceed onward without fear. Hamersley felt as if fresh blood had been infused into his

veins; and he was ready to spring to his feet at the same time as his comrade.

‘Frank! d’ye think ye kin go a little furrer now?’ was the interrogatory put by the hunter.

‘Yes, Walt; miles farther,’ was the response; ‘I feel as if I could walk across the grandest spread of prairie.’

‘Good!’ ejaculated the guide. ‘I’m glad to hear you talk that way. If we kin but git a wheen o’ miles atween us an’ them yelpin’ savages, we may hev a chance o’ salvation yit. The wust o’ the thing air, that we don’t know which way to go. It’s a toss up ’tween ’em. If we turn back torst the Canadyen, we may meet ’em agin, an’ right in the teeth. Westart lie the settlements o’ the Del Nort; but we mout come on the same Injuns by goin’ that direckshun: I’m not sartin they’re Tenawas. Southart this Staked Plain hain’t no endin’ till ye git down to the Grand river below its big bend, an’ that ain’t to be thort o’. By strikin’ east, a little southart, we mout reach the head-sources o’ the Loozyany Red; an’ oncest on a stream o’ runnin’ water, this child kin ginerally

navigate down it, provided he hev a rifle, powder, an' a bullet or two in his pouch. Thank the Almighty Lord, we've stuck to your gun through the thick an' the thin o't. Ef we hedn't, we mout jest as well lie down agin, an' make a die at oncest.'

'Go which way you please, Walt; you know best. I am ready to follow you; and I think I shall be able.'

'Wal, at anyhow we'd best be movin' off from hyar. If ye can't go a great ways under kiver o' the night, I reck'n we kin put enuf o' paraira atween us an' these Injuns, to make sure agin thar spyin' us in the mornin'. So let's start south-east-art, an' try for the sources o' the Red. Thar's that ole beauty o' the North Star thet's been my friend an' guide many's the good time. Thar it is, makin' the handle o' the Plough, or the Great Bar, as I've heerd that air colleckshin o' stars freekwently called. We've only to keep it on our left, a leetle torst the back o' the shoulder, an' then we're boun' to bring out on some o' the head-forks o' the Red—if we kin only last long enuf to reech 'em. Darn

it, thar's no danger ; an' anyhow thar's no help for it but try. Come along !'

So saying the hunter started forward, not in full stride, as he would otherwise have done, but timing his pace to suit the feeble step of his disabled companion.





CHAPTER XVI.

A LILLIPUTIAN FOREST.

GUIDING their course by the stars, the fugitives continued on, no longer going in a run, nor even in a very rapid walk. Despite the resolution with which he endeavoured to nerve himself, the wounded man was still too weak to make much progress; and they advanced but slowly over the plain. His companion did not urge him to quicken his pace. The experienced prairie man knew it would be better to go slowly than get broken down by straining forward too eagerly. There was no sign or sound of pursuit, either behind or before them. The stillness of the desert was around them—its silence only interrupted by the ‘whip-whip’ of the night-hawk’s wings, and at intervals its note answering to

the shriller cry of the kill-deer plover, that rose screaming before their faces. These, with the constant skirr of the ground-crickets, and the baying bark of the coyoté, were the only sounds that saluted them as they passed on—none of which were of a kind to cause alarm.

There appeared no compulsory reason for making much haste. They had all the night before them, and before daylight could again discover them, they would be sure to find some place of concealment.

The ground was favourable to pedestrianism in the darkness. The surface, hard-baked by the sun, was level as a set flagstone, and in most places so smooth that a carriage could have glided over it, as over the drive of a park. Well for them it was thus. Had the path been a rugged one, the wounded man could not have gone far without giving out. Even as it was, the toil soon began to tell upon his wasted strength and veins almost emptied of blood.

Nor did they proceed a very great distance before again coming to a halt, though far enough

to feel sure that, standing erect, they could not be seen by any one who might ascend the cliff at the place where they had made departure from it.

But they had also reached that which offered them a chance of cover—in short, a forest. It was a forest not discernible at more than a mile's distance, for the trees that composed it were 'shin oaks'—the tallest not rising to a height of over eighteen inches above the surface of the ground. Eighteen inches was enough to conceal the body of a man lying in a prostrate attitude ; and as the Lilliputian trees grew thick as jimson weeds, the cover would be a secure one. Unless the pursuers should stray so close as to tread upon them, there would be no danger of their being seen. Farther reflection had by this time satisfied them, that the Indians were not now upon the upper plain. It was not likely, after the pains they had taken to smoke them in the cave, and afterwards cover them up. Besides, the distribution of the spoils would be an attraction sure to have drawn them back to the wagons—and speedily.

Becoming satisfied that there was no longer

a likelihood of their being pursued across the plain, Wilder proposed that they should again make stop; this time to obtain sleep, which in their anxiety during their previous spell of rest they had not thought of.

Walt made the proposal out of consideration for his comrade; who for some time, as he saw, had evidently been hard labouring to keep up with him.

‘We kin lie by till sun-up,’ he said; ‘an’ then, if we see any sign o’ pursoot, kin stay hyar till the sun go down ag’in. These shin oaks will gie us kiver enuf. Squatted there’ll be no chance o’ thar diskiverin’ us, unless they stumble right atop o’ us.’

His companion was not in the mood to make objection; and the two laid themselves along the earth, the miniature forest not only giving them the protection of a screen, but a soft bed, as their tiny trunks and leaf-laden branches became spread out beneath their bodies.

They remained awake only long enough to give Hamersley’s wound such dressing as the circum-

stances would permit, and then both sank into slumber.

With the young prairie merchant it was neither deep nor profound. Horrid visions floated before his rapt senses—scenes of red carnage—causing him ever and anon to awake with a start, once or twice with a cry that also aroused his companion.

Otherwise Walt Wilder would have slept as soundly as if reposing on the couch of a log-cabin a thousand miles removed from any scene of danger. It was no new thing for him to go to sleep with the yell of the savages sounding in his ears. For a period of over twenty years he had daily as nightly stretched his huge frame along mountain slope or level prairie, and often with far more danger of having his ‘hair raised’ before standing erect again. For ten years Walt had belonged to the ‘Texas Rangers’—that strange organisation that had existed ever since Stephen Austin had first planted his colony in the territory of the ‘Lone Star.’ If on this night the ex-ranger was more than unusually restless, it was from

anxiety about his comrade, and the state of his nervous system, stirred to feverish excitement by the terrible conflict through which he had just passed. Notwithstanding all, he slumbered in long spells, at times snoring like an alligator.

At no time did he stand in need of very much sleep, even after the most protracted toil. Six hours was his usual daily or nocturnal dose; and as the gray dawn began to glimmer over the tops of the shin oaks, he sprang to his feet, shook the dew from his shoulders like a startled stag, and then bent down to examine the condition of his comrade.

‘Don’t ye git up yit, Frank,’ he said. ‘We musn’t start till we hev a clar view all roun’, an’ be sure there’s neery redskin in sight. Then we kin take the sun a leetle on our left cheek, an’ make tracks to the south-eastart. How is’t wi’ ye, Frank?’

‘I feel weak as water; still I think I can travel a little farther.’

‘Wal, we’ll go slow. Ef there’s none o’ the skunks arter us, we kin take our time. Durn me!

I'm still a-wonderin' what Injuns they war; I'm a most sartint 'thar the Tenawa Kimanch—a band o' the Buffler-eaters an' the wust lot on all the paraira. Miny's the fight we Rangers used to hev wi' 'em, an' miny's the one o' em this child hev rubbed out. Ef I only hed my rifle hyar—durn the luck hevin' to desart that gun—I ked show you nine nicks on her timmer as stan' for nine Tenawa Kimanch. Ef 't be them, we've got to keep well to the southart. Thar range lays most in the Canadyin, or round the heads o' Big Wichitu, an' they mout cross a corner o' the Staked Plain on thar way home. Tharfur we must go southart a good bit, an' try for the north fork o' the Brazos. Ef we meet Injun thar, they'd be Southern Kimanch—not nigh sech feeroshus varmints as them. Do you know, Frank, I've been hevin' a dreem bout them Injuns as attacked us?

'A dream! So have I. It is not strange for either of us to dream of them. What was yours, Walt?

'Kewrus enuf mine war; though it warn't all

a dream. I reck'n I war mor'en half awake when I tuk to thinkin' about 'em, an' 'twar somethin' I see'd durin' the skrimmage. Didn't you observe nothin' queery ?'

'Rather say, nothing that was not that way. It was all queer enough, and terrible too.'

'That this child will admit wi' full freedom. But I've fit redskin afore in all sorts an' shapes, yet niver see'd redskin sech as them.'

'In what did they differ from other savages ? I saw nothing different.'

'But I did : leastway I suspek I did. Didn't you spy 'mong the lot two or three that had ha'r on thar faces ?'

'Yes ; I noticed that. I thought nothing of it. It's common among the Comanches, and other tribes of the Mexican territory ; many of whom are of 'mixed breed—from the captive Mexican women they have among them.'

'The ha'r I see'd didn't look like it grew on the face o' a mixed blood.'

'But there are pure white men among them —outlaws, who have run away from civilisation

and turned renegades—as also captives they have taken, who become *Indianised*, as the Mexicans call it. Doubtless, it may have been some of these we saw.’

‘Wall, you may be right, Frank. Sartint thar war one I see’d wi’ a beard most as big ’s my own—only it war black. His hide war black too, or nigh to it; but ef that skunk wan’t white un’erneath a coatin’ o’ charcoal an’ vermillion, then Walt Wilder don’t know a Kristyun from a heethun. ’Tain’t no use spek’latin’ on’t now. White, black, yella-belly or red, they’ve put us afoot on the paraira, an’ kim darned nigh wipin’ us out althegither. We’ve got a fair chance o’ goin’ un’er yit, eyther from thirst or the famishment o’ empty stomaks. I’m hungry enuf arready to eat a coyoat. Thar’s a heavy row afore us, Frank, an’ we must strengthen our hearts to hoein’ o’ it. Wall, the sun’s up; an’ as thar don’t appear to be any obstruckshun, I reck’n we’d best be makin’ tracks.’

Hamersley slowly, and somewhat reluctantly, rose to his feet. He still felt himself in a poor

condition for travelling. But to stay there was to die ; and bracing himself to the effort, he stepped out side by side with his colossal companion.

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CHAPTER XVII.

STRUGGLING AMONG THE SAGES.

It is the fourth day after forsaking their couch among the shin oaks, and the two fugitives are still travelling upon the Staked Plain. They have not made more than sixty miles to the south-eastward, and have not yet struck any of the streams leading out to the lower level of the Texan champaign.

Their progress has been slow; the wounded man, instead of recovering strength, has but grown feebler. His steps are now unequal and tottering. In addition to the loss of blood, something else has aided to disable him: the fierce cravings of hunger, and the yet more insufferable agony of thirst.

His companion is similarly afflicted; if not in

so great a degree, enough to make him almost stagger in his steps. Neither have had any water since the last drop drank amid the wagons, before commencing the fight, and since then a fervent sun shining daily down upon them ; with no food save crickets caught on the plain, an occasional horned frog, and some fruits of the opuntia cactus—these last obtained sparingly.

Hunger has made havoc with both, sad and quick. Already at the end of the fourth day they are skeletons—more like spectres than men.

And the scene around them is in keeping. The plain, far as the eye can reach, is covered with *artemisia*, whose hoary foliage, in close contact at the tops, displays a continuation of surface, like a vast winding-sheet spread over the world.

Across this fall the shadows of the two men, proportioned to their respective heights. That of the ex-ranger extends nearly a mile before him ; for the sun is low down, and they have its beam upon their backs.

They are facing eastward, in the hope of being able to reach the brow of the Llano where it fronts

on the Texan prairies ; though in the heart of one of them that hope is nearly dead. Frank Hamersley has but slight thought he will ever again see the homes of civilisation, or set foot upon its frontier. Even the *ci-devant* ranger is yielding to a similar apprehension.

Not far off are other animated beings, that seem to rejoice. The shadows of the two men are not the only ones that move over the silvery surface of the artemisia. There too are outlined the wings of birds—large birds, with sable plumage, and red naked necks, whose species both know well. They are the *xopilotés*—the buzzard-vultures of Mexico.

A score of such shadows are flitting over the sage—a score of the birds are wheeling in the air above.

It is a sight to pain the traveller, even when seen at a distance. Over his own head it may inspire him with distress and fear, for he cannot fail to read in it a forecast of his fate.

The birds were following the men, just as they would a wounded buffalo or stricken deer. They

soared and circled above them, at times swooping portentously near. *They* did not believe them to be spectres. Skeletons as the travellers appeared, there would still be a banquet upon their bones.

Now and then Walt Wilder cast a glance up towards them. It was anxious, though he took care to hide his anxiety from his comrade. He cursed them, but not in speech—only in his heart, and silently.

For a time the wearied wayfarers kept on without exchanging a word. Hitherto consolation had come from the side of the ex-ranger; but he seemed to have spent his last effort, and was himself now despairing.

In Hamersley's heart hope had been gradually dying out, as his strength became farther exhausted. At length the latter gave way, the former at the same time becoming extinguished.

'No farther, Walt!' he exclaimed, coming to a halt. 'I can't go a step farther. There's a fire in my throat that chokes me—something grasps me within. It is dragging me to the ground.'

The hunter stopped too. He made no at-

tempt to urge his comrade on. He saw it would be idle.

‘Go on yourself,’ Hamersley added, gasping out the words. ‘You have yet strength left; and may reach water. I cannot, but I can die. I’m not afraid to die. Leave me, Walt; leave me!’

‘Niver!’ was the response, in a hoarse husky voice, but firm as if it came from the throat of a speaking-trumpet.

‘You will—you must. Why should two lives be sacrificed for one? Yours may still be saved. Take the gun along with you. You may find something. Go, comrade—friend—go!’

Again the same response, in the same tone.

‘I sayed, when we were in the fight,’ added the colossal hunter, ‘an’ aterwards gallupin’ through the smoke, that livin’ or dyin’ we’d got to stick thegither. Didn’t I say that, Frank Hamersley? I repeat it now. Ef you go unner hyar in the middle o’ this sage brush, Walt Wilder air goin’ to wrap his karkiss in a corner o’ the same windin’ sheet. There ain’t much strength left in his ole skeleton now; but enuf, I reckon, to keep them

buzzarts off for a good spell yit. They don't pick our bones till I've thinned thar count anyhow. Ef we air to be rubbed out, it 'll be by the chokin' o' thirst, an' not the gripin' o' hunger. What durned fools we've been, not to a-thinked o't afore! but who'd iver thunk o' eatin' turkey-buzzart? Wall, it's die dog, or swaller the hatchet; so, stinkin' as thar flesh may be, hyar goes to git a meal o' it!'

While speaking, he had carried the gun to his shoulder, and simultaneous with his last words came the crack, quick followed by the descent of a dead zopilote among the sages.

'Now, Frank,' he said, picking up the body of the bird, while the scared flock flew farther away, 'let's light a bit o' a fire, an' cook it. Thar's plenty o' sage for the stuffin', an' its own flavor 'll do for the seasonin' o' the inyuns. I reck'n we kin git some o' it down, by shetting our noses; an', at all events, it 'll keep us alive a leetle longer. Wagh, ef we only hed water!'

As if a fresh hope had shot suddenly across his mind, he once more raised himself erect, on

tiptoe, to the full stretch of his gigantic stature, and gazed eastwardly across the plain.

‘Thar’s a ridge o’ hills out that way,’ he said. ‘I’d jest spied it when you spoke o’ giein out. Whar thar’s hills, thar’s a likelihood o’ water. Sposin’, Frank, you stay hyar, whiles I make tracks torst them. They look like they wa’n’t mor’n ten miles off anyhow. I ked eezy git back by the mornin’. D’ye think ye kin hold out thet long by eatin’ a bit o’ the buzzart?’

‘I think I could hold out that long as well without eating it. It’s the thirst that’s killing me. I feel as if there was fire coursing through my veins. If you think there is any chance of finding water, go, Walt; and leave the buzzard till you come back.’

‘I’ll do it; but don’t you sturve in the mean while. Cook the critter afore lettin’ it kim to that. Ye’ve got punk, an’ kin make a fire o’ the sage brush. I don’t intend to run the risk o’ sturvin’ myself; an’ as I mayent find anythin’ on the way, I’ll take one o’ these sweet-smellin’ chickens along wi’ me.’

He had already reloaded the rifle, and once more poising its muzzle towards the sky, he brought down a second of the zopilotés.

‘Now, Frank,’ he said, taking up the foul bird, and slinging it to his belt, ‘keep up yur heart till this child return to ye. I’m sure o’ gettin’ back by the mornin’; an’ to make sartint ’bout the place, jest you squat unner the shadder o’ yon big palmetto—the which I kin see far enuf off to find the place ’ithout having any defeequelty.’

The palmetto spoken of was in truth not a ‘palmetto,’ though a plant of kindred genus. It was a *yucca* of a species peculiar to the high table plains of northern and central Mexico, with long sword-shaped leaves springing aloe-like from a core in the centre, and radiating in all directions, so as to form a spherical chevaux-de-frise. Its top rose nearly six feet above the surface of the ground, and high over the artemisias—while its dark rigid spikes contrasting with their frosted foliage, rendered it a conspicuous landmark that could be seen afar off upon the plain.

Staggering on till he stood by it, Hamersley

dropped down on its eastern side, where its dark shadow gave him protection from the sun, still fervid though setting; while that of Walt Wilder was again projected to its full length upon the plain, as, with the rifle across his shoulder, and the turkey-buzzard dangling adown his thigh, he took his departure from the spot—going eastward towards the ridge but dimly discernible in the distance.





CHAPTER XVIII.

A HUNTRESS.

‘COME, Lolita! cheer up, my pretty pet! Two leagues more, and you shall bury that velvet muzzle of yours in the soft *gramma* grass, and cool your heated hoofs in the valley stream. Ay, and you shall have a half peck of piñon nuts for your supper, I promise you. You’ve done well to-day, but don’t now let us be belated. At night you know we might get lost on the llano, and the coyotés would eat us both up. That would be a sad thing, *mia yegua*. We must not let the jackals have a chance to dispose of us in that manner. *Adelante!*’

‘Lolita’ was a pretty mustang mare of golden yellow colour, with white mane and tail; while the person thus apostrophising her was a girl seated upon her back.

It was a beautiful girl, apparently under twenty years of age, but with a certain commanding mien that gave her the appearance of being older. Her complexion, though white, had a tinge of that golden brown, or olivine, characteristic of the Andalusian skin; while scimitar-shaped eyebrows, with tresses of silken texture, black as the shadows of night, with a dark down on the upper lip, still more plainly proclaimed the Moorish admixture.

It was a face of lovely cast and almost Grecian contour, the features of classic regularity; while the absence of obliquity in the orb of the eye—despite her Moorish complexion—forbade the belief in Indian blood.

Although in a part of the world where this might have been expected, there was in truth not a taint of it in her veins. The olive tint was Hispano-Moriscan; a complexion, if not more beautiful, certainly more picturesque than that of the fair Saxon.

With the damask-red dancing out upon her cheeks and eyes, aglow from the equestrian ex-

ercise she had been taking, the young girl looked the picture of physical health, while the tranquil expression upon her features told of mental contentment.

Strangest of all were her equipments and surroundings. She bestrode her mustang man-fashion—the mode of Mexico; while a light fowling-piece, suspended *en bandoulière*, hung down behind her back.

A woollen *serape* of finest woof lay scarf-like across her left shoulder, half-concealing a velvet vest or spencer, close-buttoned over the rounded hemispheres of her bosom. Below, an embroidered skirt—the *enagua*—was continued by a pair of white *calzoncillas*, falling over her small feet, that were booted and spurred.

On her head was a hat of soft vicuña wool, with a band of bullion, and a bordering of gold lace around the rim.

This, with her attitude on horseback—that would appear *outré* in the eyes of a stranger to her country—the gun and its concomitant accoutrements, might have given her a masculine appear-

ance; and at the first glance have caused her to be mistaken for a man—a beardless youth.

But the long silken tresses scattered loosely over her shoulders, the finely-cut features, the delicate texture of the skin, the petticoat skirt, the small hand, and slender tapering fingers stretched forward to caress the neck of the mustang mare—were signs of femininity not to be mistaken.

A woman—a huntress; this last farther declared by a brace of hounds—large dogs of the mastiff-bloodhound breed—following at the heels of the horse. And a huntress who had been successful in the chase; as was proved by two pronghorn antelopes, with skanks tied together, lying like saddle-bags along Lolita's flanks.

The mustang mare needed no spur beyond the sound of that sweet well-known voice. At the word *adelante* (forward) she pricked up her ears, gave a wave to her snow-white tail, and broke into a gentle canter, the hounds following at a long stretching trot.

For about ten minutes was this pace con-

tinued ; when a bird flying across her course, so close that its wings almost brushed Lolita's snout, caused her mistress to lean back in the saddle and check her up.

The bird was a black vulture—a zopilote. It was not slowly soaring in the usual way, but shooting in a direct line, and swiftly as an arrow sent from the bow.

This it was that brought the huntress to a halt ; and she for a time remained motionless, her eye following the vulture in its flight.

It was seen to join a flock of its fellows, so far off as to look like specks. The young girl could perceive that they were not flying in any particular direction, but soaring in circles, as if over some quarry that lay below. Whatever it was, they did not appear to have yet touched it. All kept aloft, none of them alighting on the ground, though at times swooping down and skimming close to the tops of the sage bushes with which the plain was thickly covered.

These last prevented the huntress from seeing what lay upon the ground ; though she knew there

must be something to have attracted the concourse of zopilotes. She had evidently enough knowledge of the desert to understand its signs; and this was one of a significant character. It not only challenged her curiosity, but seemed to court investigation.

‘Something gone down yonder, and not yet dead,’ she muttered, in interrogative soliloquy. ‘I wonder what it can be. I never look on those filthy birds without fear. *Santissima!* how they made me shudder, that time when they flapped their black wings in my own face! I pity any disabled creature threatened by them—even if it were but a coyoté. It may be that, or an antelope. Nothing else likely to become their prey on this bare plain. Come, Lolita! let us go and see what they’re after. It will take us a little out of our way, and give you some extra work. You won’t mind that, my pet? I know you won’t.’

The mare came round at a slight pressure upon the rein; and then recommenced her canter in the direction of the soaring flock.

A mile passed over, and the birds were brought near. But still the object attracting them could not be seen. It might be down among the artemisias; or perhaps behind a large yucca, whose dark whorl rose several feet above the sage, and over which the vultures were wheeling.

As the fair equestrienne had got within gunshot distance of the yucca plant, she checked her mustang to a slower pace—to a walk, in short. In the spectacle of death, still more in the struggles of an expiring creature—even though it be but a dumb brute—there is something that never fails to excite commiseration, mingled with a feeling of awe. This last had come over her, as she drew near the spot over which the birds were hovering.

It had not occurred to her that the object of their presence might be a human being; though it was a remembrance of this kind that was causing her to ride forward so slowly and reflectively. Once in her life, with others around her who were near and dear, she had been the object of eager solicitude to a flock of zopilotes.

Not the slightest thought of its being a human creature that caused their gathering now ; there, upon the Llano Estacado, so rarely trodden by human feet—and even shunned by almost every species of animal.

As she drew still nearer, a black disk, dimly outlined against the dark green leaves of the yucca, upon scrutiny betrayed the form of a bird itself—a vulture. It was dead, hanging half-impaled upon the sharp spikes of the plant, as if it had been hung there, or had fallen from above.

A smile curled upon the lips of the fair equestrienne as she saw it.

‘ So, Lolita !’ she said, bringing the mare to a stand and half-turning her, ‘ I’ve been losing my time and you your labour. The abominable birds—it’s only one of themselves that has fallen. *Ay de mi !*’

She continued, again facing toward the dead vulture :

‘ I wonder if they are only waking it ; or if the wakers are cannibals, and mean to make a meal of one of their own kind. That would be a curious

fact for our natural historian, Don Prospero. I think I shall stay awhile and see.'

For a moment she seemed undecided as to staying or going. Only for a moment; an incident occurring that changed the current of her thoughts from scientific curiosity to something akin to fear.

The bloodhounds, that had fallen behind in her gallop across the plain, now closed up, and, instead of stopping by the tail of Lolita, rushed on towards the yucca. It was not the odour of the dead buzzard—strong as that may have been—that attracted them on; but the scent of what was more congenial to their sanguinary instincts.

On arriving at the yucca, they ran around to the opposite side of the plant, and then sprang growling back, as if something standing on the defensive had suddenly brought them to bay.

'A wounded wolf, doubtless,' was the muttered reflection of their mistress.

It had scarce passed her lips when she was made aware of her mistake. Above the continued howling of the hounds, she could distinguish the

tones of a human voice ; and at the same instant, a man's head and hand appeared above the spikes of the plant—the latter clutching the handle of a long-bladed and bloody knife !

It was this that had brought the dogs to bay.





CHAPTER XIX.

‘DOWN, DOGS!’

NOTWITHSTANDING her apparent *sang-froid*, and the presence of mind she evidently possessed, the rider of Lolita was affrighted—far more than the vultures that had soared higher at sight and hearing of the *fracas*.

And no wonder that she was affrighted at such a strange apparition: the head of a man, with a dark beard upon his face, holding in his hand a blade that showed blood upon it! This too in such a strange place!

Her first thought was to turn Lolita’s head and gallop off from the spot; then a reflection stayed her. The man was evidently alone; and the expression of his face was not that of villany or anger. The colour of his skin, and the beard, bespoke him a white man, and not an Indian.

Besides, there was pallor upon his cheeks—a wan wasted look, that told of suffering, not sin.

All this the quick eye of the huntress took in at a glance, resolving her how to act. Instead of galloping away, she spurred the mustang on towards the yucca.

When close up to it, she threw herself out of the saddle, and whip in hand rushed up to the hounds, that were still giving tongue, and threatening an attack upon the stranger.

‘*Abajo, perros! abajo, feos!*’ (Down, dogs! down, you ugly brutes!)

‘*A tierra!*’ she continued to exclaim, giving each a sharp cut, that at once reduced them to quiescence, causing them to cower at her feet. ‘Do not you see the mistake you have made?’ she went on, still addressing the dogs; ‘don’t you see the cavallero is not an Indian? It is well, sir,’ she added, now turning to the ‘cavallero,’ ‘that your skin is white. Had it been copper-coloured, I’m not certain I could have saved you from getting it scratched. My pets here are not partial to the American aboriginal.’

During these somewhat bizarre speeches, and the actions that accompanied them, Frank Hamersley—for it was he—stood in staring and silent wonder. What saw he before him? Two large and fierce-looking dogs, a horse oddly caparisoned, a young girl, scarce a woman, strangely and picturesquely garbed. What had he heard? First the loud baying of bloodhounds, threatening to tear him to pieces, then a voice sweet and musical as the warbling of a bird!

Was it all a dream?

Dreaming he had been, when aroused by the growling of the hounds. But that was a horrid vision. What he now saw was the very reverse. Demons had been assaulting him in his sleep. Now an angel stood before his face.

The young girl had ceased speaking ere the vertigo, caused by his sudden uprising, had cleared away from his brain, and he began to believe in the reality of the objects around him.

The shock of surprise had imparted a momentary strength, that soon passed; and his feebleness once more returning, he would have fallen

back to the earth, had he not clutched at the yucca, whose stiff blades sustained him.

‘*Valga me, Dios!*’ exclaimed the girl, now more clearly perceiving his condition. ‘*Valga me, Dios!*’ she repeated in a compassionate tone, ‘you are suffering, sir? Is it hunger? Is it thirst? You have been lost upon the Llano Estacado?’

‘Hunger—thirst—both, señorita,’ said Hammersley, speaking for the first time. ‘For days I have not tasted either food or drink.’

‘*Virgen santissima!* is it so?’

And as she said this, the huntress ran towards her horse, and jerking a little wallet from the horn of the saddle, along with a suspended gourd, came instantly back again.

‘Here, señor!’ she said, plunging her hand into the bag, and bringing forth some cold *tortillas*; ‘here is all I have: I’ve been the whole day from home, and the rest is eaten. Here—take the water first. No doubt you need drink most. I remember how I suffered myself. Mix some of this with it. It will give you strength more than anything.’

As she spoke she handed him the gourd, which by its weight contained over a pint; and then from another and smaller one she poured some liquid first into the water, and then over the tortillas. It was vinegar, in which there was an infusion of *chilé colorado*.

‘Am I not robbing you?’ asked Hamersley, as he cast a significant glance out over the wide sterile plain.

‘No—no! I am not in need; besides, I have not a great way to go to where I can get a fresh supply. Drink, señor!—drink it all.’

In ten seconds after, the calabash was empty.

‘Now eat the tortillas. ’Tis but poor fare, but the *chilé vinagre* will be sure to refresh and strengthen you. We who dwell in the desert know that.’

Her words proved true; for after swallowing a few morsels of the bread she had besprinkled, Hamersley felt as if some restorative medicine had been administered to him.

‘Do you think you would be able to ride, señor?’ she asked.

‘I could walk—though perhaps not very far.’

‘If you can ride, there is no need for your walking. You can mount my mare. I shall go afoot. It is not very far—only six miles.’

‘But, señorita,’ protested Hamersley, ‘I must not leave this spot.’

‘Indeed!’ she exclaimed, turning upon her protégé a look of surprise. ‘For what reason, señor? To stay here would be to perish. You have no companions to assist you?’

‘I have companions—at least one. That is why I must remain here. Whether he may return to assist me, I know not. He has gone off in search of water. In any case he will be certain to return.’

‘But why should you stay for him?’

‘Need you ask, señorita? He is my comrade, true and faithful. He has been the sharer of my dangers—of late no common ones. If he were to come back here and find me gone—’

‘What would that signify, cavallero? He will know where to go after you.’

‘How should he know?’

‘O, that will be easy enough. Leave it to me. Are you sure he can find the way back to this place?’

‘Quite sure. This yucca will guide him. He noted it before leaving.’

‘In that case, señor, there can be no reason for your remaining. On the contrary, I see that you need better care than you could have among these sage-plants. I know one who can give it. Come with me, cavallero! By the time your comrade can get back, I shall send one to meet him. Lest he should return before my messenger arrive, this will save him from going astray.’

As she spoke, she drew forth a small slip of paper from beneath her velvet vest, and along with it a pencil. She was about to write upon it, when a thought restrained her.

‘Does your comrade understand Spanish?’ she asked.

‘Only a word or two. He speaks English, or, as we call it, American.’

‘Can he *read*?’

‘Indifferently. Enough, I suppose, for—’

‘Señor,’ she said, interrupting him, ‘I need not ask if you can write. Take this, and write in your own language. Say you are gone south, due south, to a distance of about six miles. Tell him to stay here, and some one will come on to meet and guide him to where you can be found.’

Hamersley perceived the rationality of these instructions. There was no reason why he should not do as desired, and at once go with her who gave them. By staying, some mischance might still happen, and he might never see his strange rescuer again. Who could tell what would arise in the midst of that mysterious desert? By going he would the sooner be able to send back succour to his comrade.

He hesitated no longer, but wrote upon the piece of paper, in large carefully inscribed letters—so that the *ci-devant* ranger would have no difficulty in deciphering them:

‘Saved by an angel! Strike due south. Six miles from here you will find me. There is a horse, and you can follow his tracks. If you stay here for a time, one will come to guide you.’

The huntress took the paper from his hand, and glanced at the writing, as if out of curiosity to scan the script of a language unknown to her. But something like a smile playing around her lips might have led one to believe that she had divined the meaning of the initial sentence.

She made no remark, however; but, stepping forward to the yucca and reaching up, she impaled the piece of paper on its topmost spike.

‘Now, cavallero,’ she said, ‘you mount my mare. See, she stands ready for you.’

Hamersley again protested; saying he could walk well enough—though his tottering steps contradicted him.

He urged his objections in vain.

The young girl appealingly persisted; until at length, for once in his life, his gallantry had to give way, and he climbed reluctantly into the saddle.

‘Now, Lolita!’ said her mistress, ‘see that your step is sure, or you sha’n’t have the piñons I promised you. *Nos vamos, señor!*’

Saying this, she stepped off through the sage, the mustang keeping by her side; and the two great hounds, like a rear-guard, bringing up at some distance behind.





CHAPTER XX.

AN OASIS.

FRANK HAMERSLEY rode on, wondering at his strange guide. Such a lovely being encountered in such an out-of-the-way corner of the world, in the midst of a treeless, waterless desert, over a hundred miles from the nearest civilised settlement!

Who was she? Where had she come from? Whither was she conducting him?

To the last question he would soon have an answer; for as they advanced she now and again spoke words to encourage him, telling him they would soon arrive at a place of rest.

‘Yonder!’ she at length exclaimed, pointing to two mound-shaped elevations that rose twin-like above the level of the plain. ‘Between them lies

our path. Once there, we shall not have much farther to go. The *rancho* will be in sight.'

The young prairie merchant made no reply. He only thought of how strange it all was—the beautiful being by his side—her dash—her wonderful knowledge, exhibited with such an air of *naïveté*—her generous behaviour—the picturesqueness of her dress—her hunter equipments—the great dogs trotting at her heels—the dead game on the croup behind him—the animal he bestrode—all were before his mind, and mingling in his thoughts, like the unreal phantasmagoria of a dream.

And not any more like reality was the scene disclosed to his view, when, after passing around the nearest of the twin mound-shaped hills, and entering a gate-like gorge that opened between them, he saw before him and below, hundreds of feet below, a valley of elliptical form, like a vast basin scooped out from the plain. But for its oval shape he might have deemed it the crater of some extinct volcano. And then, where was the lava that should have been projected from it? With the exception of the two hillocks on each hand, all

the country around, far as the eye could reach, was level as the bosom of a placid lake. Like anything but a crater was the concavity itself. No gloom down there, no black scoriæ, no returning streams of lava, nor débris of pumice-stone; but, on the contrary, a smiling vegetation—trees with foliage of different shades of green, among which could be distinguished the frondage of the live-oak and pecan, the more brilliant verdure of the alamos, and the flower-loaded branches of the wild China-tree. In their midst was a glassy disk that told of standing water, with here and there a fleck of white foam that spoke of cool cascades and cataracts. Near the lakelet that shone in the centre, a tiny column of blue smoke rising up over the tree-tops indicated the presence of a dwelling; and as they advanced a little farther into the gorge, the house itself could be descried.

In contrast with the dreary plain over which he had been so long toiling, to Hamersley it seemed a Paradise, worthy to be the home of the Peri who was conducting him to it. It resembled a landscape painted upon the concave sides of an

oval-shaped basin, with the cloudless sky, like a vast cover of blue glass, arching above.

The scene seemed scarcely real; and once more the young prairie merchant began to doubt the evidence of his senses. After all, was it only a vision of his brain — distempered by the long strain upon his mind, and the agony he had been enduring? Or was it but the mirage of the desert plain, that had so oft already deceived him?

His doubts were dispelled by that sweet voice breaking once more upon his ear.

‘*Mira*, cavallero! you see where you are going now. It is not far; but you will have to keep a firm seat in the saddle, for the next hundred yards or so. There is a steep descent, and a narrow pathway. Take good hold with your knees, and trust altogether to the mare. She knows the way well, and will bear you in safety. Won’t you, Lolita? You will, my pet.’

As she said this, the mustang gave a soft whimper, as if answering her interrogatory.

‘Well, I shall myself go before. So loose the rein, and leave Lolita to her own way, señor.’

On giving this injunction, she turned abruptly to the right, where a path that seemed almost perpendicular led along a ledge, traversing the façade of the cliff. Still close followed by the mustang, she advanced fearlessly along it.

It seemed a most dangerous descent, even for one afoot; and if left to his own will, Hamersley would have declined attempting it on horseback. But he had no choice now; for before he could have made either expostulation or protest, Lolita had struck out along the ledge, and was hastening on, her hind-quarters high up in the air, and her neck extended in the opposite direction, as if standing upon her head! To her rider there was no alternative but do as he had been directed—stick to the saddle. This he did by throwing his feet forward, and laying his back flat along the croup, till his shoulders rested between the crossed shanks of the pronghorns.

In this position he remained, without saying a word, or even daring to look below; till he at length found himself moving forward with his face upturned to the sky, and thus discovered that

the animal he bestrode was once more progressing along a nearly horizontal path.

‘Now, señor,’ said the voice of Lolita’s mistress, ‘you can sit upright: the danger is past. You have behaved well, *mia yegua—yeguita!*’ she added, patting the mare upon the neck; ‘you shall have the promised piñons—a whole *cuartilla* of them.’

Once more stepping to the front, she struck off among the trees, along a path which still inclined downward, though only in a gentle slope.

Hamersley’s brain was in a whirl. The strange scenes, things, thoughts, and fancies, were weaving weird spells around him; and once more he began to think that his senses either had forsaken, or were forsaking him.

This time it was so: for the long-protracted suffering—the waste of blood and loss of strength—only spasmodically resuscitated by the excitement of the strange encounter—was now being followed by a fever of the brain, that was in reality depriving him of his reason.

He remembered riding on for some distance

farther—under trees, whose leafy boughs formed an arcade over his head, shutting out the sun—and then all around became suddenly illumined, as the mustang bore him out into an opening, with what appeared a log-cabin in the centre. He saw, or fancied he saw, several men by its door; and as the mare came to a stop in their midst, his fair conductor turned towards him, suddenly exclaiming :

‘ *Virgen santissima !* Lay hold of him ! Quick ; take hold of him ! ’

Then one of the bystanders sprang forward, but whether to be kind, or to kill, he could not tell ; for before the man had placed a hand on him, the strange tableau faded from his sight, and death, with all its dark obliviousness, seemed to take possession of his soul.





CHAPTER XXI.

A COMRADE 'GONE UNDER.'

THE shadow of Walt Wilder was again cast over the Staked Plain, and to a gigantic length; but this time westwardly, from a sun that was rising instead of setting. It was the morning after he had parted with his disabled companion; and he was now making back towards the spot where he had left him, the sun's disk just showing above the horizon of the plain, and shining straight upon his back. There it illuminated an object not seen before; and which gave to Walt's shadow a shape still more weird and fantastic. It was now that of a giant, with something sticking out on each side of his head that resembled a pair of horns, or as if his neck was embraced by an ox-

yoke, the tines of which projected diagonally outward.

On looking at Walt himself, the singularity was at once understood. The carcass of a deer lay transversely across his back, the legs of the animal being fastened together so as to form a sling, through which he had thrust his head—leaving the long slender shanks, like the ends of the letter X, slanting out on each side of his chin, and rising above his shoulders.

Despite the load thus borne by him, the step of the ex-ranger was no longer that of a man either despairing or fatigued. On the contrary, it was light and elastic, while his countenance looked gay and joyous as the beams of the ascending sun. His very shadow seemed to flit over the frosted foliage of the artemisias as lightly as the figure of a gossamer-robed belle gliding across the floor of a ballroom.

Walt Wilder no longer hungered or thirsted. Though the carcass on his back was still unskinned, a huge collop cut out of one of its hind-quarters showed he had satisfied the first craving ;

while the gurgle of water, heard inside the tin canteen hanging under his arm, proclaimed that the second had been also appeased.

He was now hastening on to the relief of his comrade—happy in the thought of being able soon to relieve him from his sufferings.

Striding lightly among the sages, and looking ahead for the landmark that was to guide him, he at length came in sight of it. The palmilla, rising like a huge porcupine above the plain, could not be mistaken ; and he saw it at more than a mile's distance, although the shadow of his head was already flickering among its bayonet-like blades.

At that moment something else came before his eyes, that changed the expression upon his countenance. From gay it became grave, serious, apprehensive. A flock of buzzards, seemingly scared by his shadow, had suddenly flapped up from among the sage-plants, and were now soaring around, close to the tops of the palmilla. They had evidently been *down upon the ground* : what could they have been doing there ?

It was this question, mentally put by Walt

Wilder, that had caused that quick change in his countenance—a change from gay thought to painful conjecture.

‘Marciful heaven!’ he exclaimed; suddenly making halt, the rifle almost dropping from his grasp. ‘Kin it be possyble? Frank Hamersley gone under! Them buzzarts! They’ve been upon the grown to a sartinty. Darnashin! what ked they a been doin’ down thar? Right by the bunch o’ palmetto, jest whar I left him. An’ no sign of himself to be seen? Marciful heaven! kin it be possyble?’

He remained for a while silent and motionless, as if paralysed by apprehension, mechanically scanning the yucca, as though from it he expected an answer to his interrogatory.

‘It *air* possyble,’ he continued after a time; ‘too possyble—too likesome. He war well-nigh done up, poor fellar—an’ no wonder. Whar is he now? He must be down by the side o’ the bush—*down an’ dead*. Ef he war alive, he’d be lookin’ out for me. By the Etarnal! he’s gone under; an’ this deer-meat, this water, purcured to no

purpiss. I mout as well throw both away ; they'll come too late.'

Once more resuming his forward stride, he advanced towards the dark mass above which the vultures were soaring. His shadow still by a long distance preceding him, had frightened the birds higher up into the air ; but they showed no signs of going altogether away. On the contrary, they kept circling around, as if they had already commenced a repast ; and although driven away, intended to return to it. On what had they been banqueting ? On the body of his comrade ? What else could be there ?

The ex-ranger was still advancing, his heart agonised with apprehension, when his eye alighted on the piece of paper impaled upon the topmost spike of the yucca-plant. It gave him relief, but only for an instant, his conjectures again leading him astray.

'Poor young fellar !' was the half-spoken reflection ; 'he's wrote somethin' to tell how he died—mayhap somethin' for me to carry back to the dear uns he's left behind in ole Kaintuck. Wall,

that thing shall sartinly be done, ef ever this child sets in the States agin. Darnation! only to think how near I war to savin' him; a whole doe-deer, an' water enough to a-drownded him! Ye may lie thar, ye useless venison. I don't care no more to put tooth into ye. Frank Hamersley gone under!—the man o' all others I'd a died to keep alive. I'd jest as soon lie down *now*, an' stop breathin' by the side o' him.'

While speaking he had flung the deer's carcass to the ground; and stalked on, leaving it behind him.

A few strides brought him so near to the yucca, that he could see the ground surface by its base. There was something black among the stems of the sage bushes. It was not the dead body of a man, but a buzzard, which he knew to be that he had shot before starting off. The sight of it caused him again to make stop. It looked draggled and torn, as if partially dismembered.

'Kin he hev been eatin' it? Or war it themselves, the cussed kannybals? Poor Frank, I

reck'n I'll find him on t'other side, looking mangled in the same way. Darn it, 'tair keurous too. 'Twair on this side he laid down to git shade from the sun. I seed him squat whiles I was walkin' away. The sun ain't hot enuf yit to a druv him to westwart o' the bush, though thar for sartin he must be. What's the use o' my stannin' shilly-shally hyar? I may as well face the sight at oncest, ugly as I know it'll prove. Hyar goes.'

Steeling himself for the terrible spectacle, which he believed was certainly awaiting him, he once more advanced towards the yucca.

A dozen strides brought him up, and less than half-a-dozen more carried him around it.

No body, living or dead—no remains of one, mutilated or otherwise!

Horse-tracks he saw there *at* a glance, and other signs that told of the late presence of human beings upon the spot—at least one besides the comrade he had believed to be dead.

No proof yet that he was not dead; only the glimmer of a hope. And now he reached out with his long arm, and eagerly clutched the piece

of paper hitherto untouched. He had believed it but a dying record—a chapter of directions to be read after death, and not till he had the full visible assurance of it. It might be something else?

His huge hands trembled and his whole frame quivered, as he held the piece of paper open between them.

‘Saved by an angel!’ He read no farther until after giving utterance to a ‘hurrah!’ that might have been heard many miles over the Staked Plain. Then more tranquillised, he continued deciphering the chirography of his comrade to the end, when a second shout terminated the effort.

‘Saved by an angel!’ he went on muttering to himself. *‘A angel on the Staked Plain! Whar ked the critter hev come from? No matter whar. Thar’s been one hyar, for sartint. Darn me, ef I don’t smell the sweet o’ her pettikotes now! This piece o’ paper—’tain’t Frank’s. I don’t knows he hed a scrap about him. No. Thar’s the scent o’ a woman about it, sure; an’ whar thar’s a woman, Frank Hamersley ain’t likely to be let die o’ star-*

vashun. Wall, I reck'n it's aM right now, an' thar ain't so much need ter be in a hurry. 'Twar rayther a quick breakfast I hed, an' hain't gin this chile's stammick full saterfacshun. I'll jest chaw another griskin o' the deer-meat, to strengthen me for the six-mile tramp southart.'

In less than five minutes after, the smoke from a sage-stalk fire was seen ascending from beside the palmilla; and in its blaze, quickly kindled, a huge piece of venison cut from the fat flanks of the doe, weighing at least four pounds, spitted upon one of the stiff blades of the plant, was rapidly turning from red to brown.

As circumstances had oftentimes compelled the ex-ranger to eat his deer-meat under-done, the habit had become his *goût*; and it was therefore not long before the griskin was removed from the spit; nor indeed very long till it ceased to be a griskin—having altogether disappeared from his fingers, followed by a gurgling sound, as half the contents of the canteen went washing it down his throat.

'Now!' he said, springing to his feet, after he

had completed his Homeric repast, 'this chile feels strong enuf to face the devil hisself, an' thar-for he needn't be backard 'bout the encounterin' o' a angel. So hyar goes to find out Frank Hamersley, an' how *he's* farin. Anyhow, I'll take the deer along, in case thar mout be a scarcity o' eetables; though I reck'n thar's no fear o' that. Whar a angel makes dwellin'-place, thar oughter be a full crib; though it mout be ambrosyer or mannar, or some o' them fixins as a paraira man's stammick ain't used to. Anyways, a bit o' doe-deer meat won't do any harm. So, Walt Wilder, ole coon, let's you an' me set our faces southart, an' see what's to turn up at the eend o' six miles' trackin'.'

Once more shouldering the carcass, he strode off towards the south, partly guiding himself by the sun, but more by the tracks of the mustang, which, though scarce distinguishable under the overshadowing sage-plants, were seen with little difficulty by an eye experienced as his.

On went he, now and then muttering to himself words of wonder, as to what sort of a woman

had carried off his comrade; for with all his jocular soliloquising, he knew the *angel* would turn out to be a *woman*.

On he went, his gigantic shadow no longer preceding, but keeping step and step by his side.





CHAPTER XXII.

A SWEET AWAKENING.

THE young prairie merchant became conscious that he still existed, by hearing voices. They were the voices of men—two of them ; and were engaged in a conversation that appeared to be carried on with some difficulty, as one was speaking English, which the other only slightly understood. Nor was the English of the first speaker of a very pure kind, but sounded in Hamersley's ear sweeter than music itself, for he recognised the voice as that of Walt Wilder. A joyful pulsation passed through his heart, to know that his comrade had rejoined him. After their parting upon the plain, he had fears that they might never come together again.

Walt was not within sight, for the conversa-

tion was carried on outside the room. Hamersley saw that he was in a room—a small one, of which the walls were logs, and the furniture fashioned in a style of corresponding rudeness. He was lying upon a *catré*, or camp-bedstead, rendered soft by a mattress of grizzly-bear skins; while a large *serapé* of bright-coloured pattern was spread over him, serving both for blanket and counterpane. In the room was a slab-table of the rudest construction, and two or three chairs, evidently made by the hand of the same unskilful workman, their seats being simply antelope skins with the hair on. On the table was a cup with a spoon in it, and two or three small bottles that had the look of containing medicines.

All these objects came under his eyes at the first dim glance; but as his sight became clearer, and he felt strength enough to raise his head from the pillow, other articles were disclosed to his view, in strange contrast with the chattels first observed. Against the wall were several pieces of female apparel—all of a costly kind. There were silks and silk-velvets, richly brocaded; while on another

table, rough as the first, he could distinguish the *bijouterie* usually belonging to a lady's toilet. These lay in front of a small mirror set in a frame that appeared to be silver; while above was suspended a beautiful guitar, of the kind known as *bandolon*. He saw all these things with a half-bewildered gaze: for his senses were still far from being clear. The articles of female apparel and toilet, with the guitar, would all have been appropriate in a lady's boudoir or bed-room. How singular to see them in juxtaposition with the rough unhewn logs of what was evidently a humble shanty or cabin!

Of course he connected them with her—that singular being who had succoured, and perhaps saved his life. He could have no other conjecture. He remembered seeing a cabin as they approached it outside. It must be that he was now in; though from the last conscious thought as he felt himself fainting in the saddle all had been as blank as if he had been lying lifeless in his tomb. Even yet it might have appeared a dream, but for the voice of Walt Wilder, who seemed to be labouring

hard to make himself understood by the personage with whom he was in conversation.

Hamersley was about to utter a cry that would summon his comrade to his side, when he perceived that the voices were becoming fainter, as if the two speakers had stepped outside the house, and were strolling away from it. Feeling too weak, even for the exertion of a shout, he remained silent, presuming they would soon return.

It was broad daylight—the sun glancing in through an open space in the wooden wall that served for window. There was neither frame nor glass, and along with the bright beams there came in a delicious fragrance of flowers; among which he could distinguish the aromatic scent of the sassafras laurel and the wild China-tree. There were voices of birds mingling their music with the sough of falling water—sounds very different from those of the desert in which he had been so long.

He lay thinking of the beautiful being who had brought him thither, weaving conjectures that might explain the strangeness of the situation. He could not tell how long he had been uncon-

scious; nor had the whole period of it been like death—unless death have its dreams. For he had had dreams, all of them with that same form and face flitting and hovering near, as if of some angelic guardian.

A strange circumstance was, that the face seemed familiar to him, or if not familiar, one he had looked upon before. He endeavoured to recall all those he had seen in New Mexico during his visit to it; for if seen anywhere, it must have been there and then. His female acquaintances had been but few in that strange land. He could remember every one of them. She was not of their number. If he had ever looked upon that face before seeing it upon the desert plain, it must have been while passing along the street of some Mexican city.

And this could scarcely be, was his silent reflection; for such a face once seen—even but for a moment—could never be forgotten.

He lay pondering on all that had passed—on all he could remember. Walt had got back, then, to the place where they had parted. He must

have found food and water—though it now mattered no more. Enough that he had got back, and both were now in an asylum of safety, under friendly protection. This was evident from the surroundings.

Still feeble as a child, these efforts of thought very soon fatigued him; and this, with the narcotic influence of the flower-perfumes, the songs of the birds, and the soothing monotone of the waters, produced a drowsiness that terminated in a profound sleep. This time he slumbered without dreaming.

How long he could not tell; but again was he awakened by voices—as before, of two persons engaged in conversation. But far different from those he had lately heard. The bird-music still pouring in through the window was not sweeter than the tones that now saluted his ear.

Again the speakers were invisible—outside the room—but he could tell that they were near the door, and the first words heard admonished him of their design to enter.

‘Come, Conchita! bring the wine with you.

You remember Don Prospero said we must give it to him at this hour.'

'Señorita, I have it here.'

'*Vaya!* you have forgotten to bring the glass. You surely would not have him drink out of the bottle?'

'*Ay de mi!* and so I have,' responded Conchita, apparently running back, and possessing herself of the required article.

'Ish!' cautioned the other voice; 'if he be still asleep, we must not awake him. Don Prospero said that. Step lightly, girl.'

Hamersley was awake, with his eyes wide open, and his consciousness quite restored. But at that moment something—he could scarcely have told what—caused him to counterfeit sleep; and he lay still with shut eyelids. He could hear the door turning upon its hinges of raw hide, the soft rustle of robes—he could feel around him that inexpressible something that denotes the sweet gentle presence of woman.

'Yes, he is asleep,' said the first speaker; 'for the world we must not disturb him. We

can wait till he awake. Don Prospero left that direction, did he not ?

‘ He did, señorita.’

‘ Well, we must do exactly as he said ; for you know, Conchita, this gentleman has been in great danger. Thanks to the good Virgin, he will get over it. Don Prospero is sure of it.’

‘ What a pity if he should not ! O señorita, isn’t he—’

‘ Isn’t he what ?’

‘ So handsome—so very beautiful. He looks like a picture I’ve seen in the church ; an angel—only that the angel had wings, and no mustaches.’

‘ Pif, girl ! Don’t speak in that way, or I shall be angry with you. *Vayate !* you may take away the wine. We can come again when he awakes. Tread lightly.’

Again there was the swishing of drapery ; but this time as if only one of the speakers was moving off. The other seemed still to linger by the side of the couch.

The invalid knew which it was. There was an electricity that told him ; and for an instant he

thought of opening his eyes, and proclaiming that he was awake. A thought restrained him—delicacy. The lady might believe that he had been awake, and overheard the conversation. It had been in Spanish, but she knew that he understood this—for he had no doubt that the ‘señorita’ was she who had conducted him thither.

He remained without moving—without unclosing his eyes. But his ears were open, and he heard, what gave him more joy, and perhaps more strength, than any potion Don Prospero could have prescribed, or Conchita administered.

It came in the shape of a soliloquy—only a few words softly spoken, and not intended to be heard.

‘It is true what Conchita says, and what Valerian told me. *He is indeed beautiful!*’

The drapery again rustled, and the door creaked upon its leathern hinges—opening and closing.

But before it had been quite shut-to, it was once more pushed open ; the invalid having signified by a slight cough that sleep had forsaken him.



CHAPTER XXIII.

DON VALERIAN.

HAMERSLEY, with head upraised upon the pillow, looked eagerly towards the re-opening door. He saw what he had been expecting — what he had seen in fancy throughout his long fevered dream — the fair form and beautiful face that had so much interested him, even in that hour when life seemed to be forsaking him.

There was a red tinge upon the cheek, that appeared to have flushed up suddenly, as if the young girl suspected that her soliloquy had been heard. She had spoken it the instant before. The words had but parted from her lips, and the thought was yet thrilling in her heart. Could he have heard her? He showed no sign.

She approached the couch with a look of soli-

cititude, mingled with interrogation. A hand was held out to her, and a word spoken that told her she was recognised. Her eyes sparkled with joy; as she saw in those of the invalid that reason had once more become seated upon its throne.

‘I am so happy,’ she said, ‘we are all so happy, to know you are out of danger. Don Prospero has told us so. You will now get well in a very short time. But I forget. We were to give you something, as soon as you should awake. It is only our Mexican wine. Conchita, bring in the wine.’

Conchita had followed her mistress into the chamber. A glance would have told her to be the maid, if the overheard conversation had not already declared it. A little brown-skinned damsel, less than five feet in height, with raven hair hanging in double plait down her back, and black eyes that sparkled like those of a basilisk.

Provident Conchita had brought the bottle and glass with her, and soon a portion of the famed grape-juice of El Paso was swallowed by the invalid.

‘How good you have been!’ he said, as his

head once more settled down upon the pillow ;
'how very kind of you, señorita !'

'Do not speak in that fashion,' she rejoined ;
'there has been no kindness in particular. You would not have had us leave a fellow-creature to perish on the plain ?'

'Ah, true ; I remember now. But for you, I suppose I should now have been in another world.'

'No, indeed ; there you are mistaken. If I had never come near you, you would have been saved all the same. Know, señor, I have good news for you. Your comrade is safe, and here. He arrived next morning at an early hour, with the whole of a deer upon his shoulders. He had found water too ; so that you see I have no merit for having rescued you. But I shall bring him in, and Don Prospero, whom I hear talking outside. Don Prospero is a good surgeon, and has well attended to your wounds. He has given instructions for you to be kept quiet ; so please do not excite yourself by trying to talk. I shall bring Don Prospero at once. Now that you are awake, it may be necessary he should see you.'

Without waiting for a reply, she glided out of the room, Conchita having gone before.

Hamersley lay pondering on what he had just heard—more especially on what he had overheard—that sweet soliloquy. Few men are insensible to flattery. And flattery from such lips! He must be near death indeed whose heart-pulsations it would not have affected.

The young Kentuckian was not going to die there, or then. He knew he was not. He felt enfeebled, but that was only through the loss of the blood spilled copiously from his veins. For such a woman's sake he could recover from a worse wound than that he had received. He would be sure to get well again. Thus thought he.

But Don Prospero! who and what was he? Was he the owner of the voice he had heard in dialogue with Walt Wilder? Might he be the owner of *all*? This thought troubled him.

Approaching footsteps outside put a stop to his conjectures. There were voices too—one of them that late sounding so sweetly in his ears. The other was a man's, though not the same he

had heard making such terrible attempts to be understood by Walt; nor was it that of the ex-ranger himself. It was the voice of Don Prospero, who soon after entered the room, the young lady leading the way.

A man of nigh sixty years of age, spare form and face, hair grizzled, cheeks wrinkled; withal hale and hearty, as could be told by the pleasant sparkle of his eye. Dressed in a semi-military suit, of a subdued tint, and facings that spoke of the medical staff.

At a glance there was no danger in Don Prospero. Hamersley felt relieved.

‘Glad to see you looking so well,’ said the old gentleman, taking hold of his patient’s hand to feel his pulse. ‘Ah! much more regular; it will be all right now. Keep quiet, and we shall soon get you on your feet again.’

‘Don Prospero,’ asked the señorita, who now, no longer wearing her huntress garb, moved about the room with all the grace of a silken-clad lady, ‘I suppose he may see his friend, and also Valerian?’

‘O certainly, niña. There is no longer any danger. A little more of the grape-juice will do him no harm. Nothing like our native wine, señor, for bringing a sick man back to his appetite. After that, we shall give you some wild-turkey broth, and a bone to pick. You ’ll soon be able to eat anything.’

‘Then I shall call them in,’ said the señorita, meaning Walt Wilder and Valerian; as she spoke disappearing from the room, and leaving Don Prospero alone with his patient.

Soon after, her sweet voice was heard outside, calling, ‘Valerian!’

‘Who is Valerian?’ feebly interrogated the invalid. Again the name of a man was making him unhappy.

‘Don Valerian!’ repeated the old surgeon, in a tone that told of respect for the individual so designated; ‘you shall see, señor. You shall soon make his acquaintance. No: I am wrong about that. You cannot *now*.’

‘But why? You have given permission for him to see me.’

‘And so he shall, and you him. There; you see him now!’

This was said as a tall elegant man, under thirty years of age, stepped inside the chamber; while a still taller form appeared in the doorway, filling up the space between the two posts.

The latter was Walt Wilder — the former Valerian.

‘Colonel Miranda!’ cried Hamersley, starting up on his couch. ‘Colonel Miranda, is it you?’

‘It is, my dear friend, myself, as you see; and I need not tell you how glad I am to meet you again. How unexpected in this queer quarter, where I little hoped to have the pleasure of entertaining an old friend! Our worthy medico here tells me you will soon get strong again, and be somewhat more of a tax on my hospitality than you have yet been. No doubt, after your very protracted fast, you will have the appetite of an ostrich. Well, in one way that will be fortunate: since here we are living, as you may see, in a somewhat Homeric fashion. *Carrambo!* you will be deeming my manners quite as rude as the

roughest of Homer's heroes. I am forgetting to introduce you to one of whom you have often heard me speak; though it don't so much signify, I suppose, since the lady has made your acquaintance already. Señor Don Francisco, permit me to present you to my sister Adela.'

It was the beautiful huntress who curtseyed to this name; and Hamersley now remembered the portrait on the wall of the *sala* in Colonel Miranda's house. He had already dismissed his suspicious fears of Don Prospero.

He now no longer dreaded Valerian.





CHAPTER XXIV.

THE REFUGEES.

‘WHY are you here?’

‘As regards Don Prospero and myself, we are here to save our heads. As for my sister—But of that I shall tell you in time; you wish to have the whole history?’

‘I do. It seems so inexplicable—a mystery, in fact, to find you here, in this oasis of the desert, as you say it is; and living in such primitive fashion. I’ve been puzzling my brains about it, ever since they became clear enough to think.’

‘Well, you shall have the puzzle solved. I’ve hitherto kept it from you, by direction of our good medico, who feared the tale might too much excite

you. But you're now strong enough, I take it, and so listen.'

It was several days after the recovery of his consciousness—the young Kentuckian still lying on the couch, and Miranda seated by his side—that this dialogue was taking place.

'One word,' commenced the Mexican colonel, 'one name, will give you the key to the whole affair; a name, Don Francisco, already known to you.'

'*Uraga!*' exclaimed Hamersley, the word issuing mechanically from his lips, while a cloud came over his brow, and a red flush flecked the pallor upon his cheeks. 'Uraga—that ruffian! I was thinking so.'

'Gil Uraga—no longer Captain Gil Uraga, but now *colonel*-commandante of the district that six months ago was mine, and living in the house where twelve months ago I had the honour of showing you some little hospitality!'

The young Kentuckian turned uneasily on his couch, his pale face becoming still farther flushed with indignation.

‘For the matter of our story,’ continued the Mexican, ‘it only needs to add, that we are refugees, and then it is all told. But the details may be interesting to you, and also how and why we have sought an asylum here. It is something of a lengthy tale, Don Francisco; and before going farther, I think it would be well to strengthen you with another *copita* of wine. Before going out, the doctor gave word for it to be given to you. Besides, I need one myself, and that will be an excuse for my having it. The host should always drink with his guest.’

With a smile, the Mexican rose from his chair, and stepped out of the room to give directions about the wine.

Hamersley lay reflecting, longing to hear the details of the interrupted narration. He had his conjectures, that in some of them at least he would feel a deep interest. He had not forgotten the conversation on the *azotea*—least of all that portion of it in which allusion was made to Uraga, and his aspiring to the hand of a certain lady. It had pained him when he had only seen her portrait;

and now that he looked upon the original, now that—

Though tortured by suspense, and something of an undefinable fear, he remained silent, awaiting the return of Miranda.

In due time Don Valerian reëntered the room, Conchita following with a flask of Paseño wine, and drinking-vessels for two. The sparkling beverage was soon quaffed, and the colonel resumed his narration.

‘Not long after you left us, I made application to the government for an increase to the mounted force over which I had command. It had become necessary, for the protection of the district from our warlike neighbours in the west—the Nava-joes. They had made several raids upon the river settlements, and carried off goods, cattle, and a number of captives. I got the force I had made requisition for; but not the right men, or at least not the officers I should have chosen. A troop of cavalry was sent to me. You may imagine my chagrin, not to say disgust, when Captain Gil Uraga at the head of his company of lancers

marched into the town of Albuquerque, and reported himself for duty. I need not tell you how unpleasant the association was, for many reasons; not the least that which I have already hinted to you—his pretensions to the hand of my sister.’

Hamersley writhed upon the couch. Perhaps had the doctor been present, he would have caused the narration to be suspended.

Miranda went on :

‘He continued his ill-received attentions whenever chance gave him an opportunity. It was not often. I took care of that; though but for precautions, and my authority as his superior officer, his advances would no doubt have been bolder—in short, persecutions. I knew that to my sister as to myself his presence even in the district was disagreeable; but there was no help for it. I could not have him removed. In all matters of military duty, he took care to act, so that there should be no pretext for a charge against him. Besides, I soon found that he was in favour with some of the government authorities, though I did not then know why. I learnt it afterwards, and

why he of all others should have been sent to Albuquerque. The *sap* had commenced for a new revolution, and he was one of its secret fomenters. He had been chosen by the *parti prêtre* as a fitting agent to act in the district—of which, like myself, he was a native.

‘ Having no suspicion of this, I only thought of him in regard to his impertinent pretensions to my sister, and against these I could restrain him. He was polite, obsequiously so, and cautiously guarded in his gallantries; so that I had no cause for resorting to the *desafío*—I could only wait and watch.

‘ The vigil was not a long one; though it ended differently from what I might have expected. About two months after his coming under my command, the late *grito* was proclaimed all over Mexico. One morning as I went down to the military quarters, I found confusion and disturbance. The soldiers were under arms, many of them drunk, and vociferating, “ *Viva Santa Anna! Viva el coronel Uraga!* ” At a glance I comprehended all. It was a *pronunciamiento*. I drew

my sword, thinking I might stem the tide of treason ; and called around me such of my followers as were still faithful. It was too late. The poison had spread throughout the whole command. My adherents were soon overpowered—several of them killed ; myself wounded, dragged to the *carcel*, and there locked up. The wonder is, that I was not executed on the spot, for I know that Uraga thirsted for my life. He was only restrained, however, by a little caution ; for although I was not put to death on that day, he intended I should never see the sun rise upon another. But he was disappointed, and I escaped.

‘ I know you will be impatient to learn how,’ resumed the refugee, after rolling and igniting a fresh cigarito. ‘ It is somewhat of an incident, and might serve the writer of a romance. I owe my life, my liberty, and, what is more, my sister’s safety, to our good friend Don Prospero. In his capacity of military surgeon he was not compromised like the rest of us ; and after the revolt in the *cuartel* he was left free to follow his vocation. While seeking permission to dress the wound I

had received, chance brought him into a position where he could overhear a conversation that was being carried on between Uruga and one of his lieutenants—a ruffian named Roblez, fit associate for his superior. They were in high glee over what had happened, carousing, and in their cups not very cautious of what they said. Don Prospero heard enough to make him acquainted with their scheme—so diabolical you will scarce give credence to it. I was to be made away with in the night—carried up to the mountains, and there murdered! With no traces left, it would be supposed that I had made my escape from the prison. And the good doctor heard other designs equally atrocious. What the demons afterwards intended doing, when my sister should be left unprotected.’

Something like a groan came from the throat of the invalid, while his fingers clutched nervously at the serapé that covered the couch.

‘Devoted to me, Don Prospero at once resolved upon a course of action. There was not a moment to be lost. He obtained permission to attend to me in the prison. It was a cheap grace on

Uraga's part, considering his ulterior design. An attendant, a sort of hospital assistant, was allowed to accompany the doctor to the cell, bearing his lints, drugs, and instruments. Fortunately I had not been quite stripped by the ruffians who had imprisoned me; and in my own purse, along with that of Don Prospero, there was a considerable sum of gold—enough to tempt the attendant to exchange clothes and places with me. He was the more ready to do so, relying upon a story he intended to tell, that we had overpowered and compelled him. Poor fellow! as we afterwards learnt, it did not save him. He was shot the next morning, to appease the chagrin of Uraga—raging furious at our escape. We cannot help feeling regret for his fate; but, under the circumstances, what else could have been done?

‘ We stepped forth from the *carcel*, the doctor leading the way, and I his assistant bearing the paraphernalia after him. We passed out of the quarters unchallenged. Fortunately the night was a dark one, and the guards were given to carousing. The sentries were nearly all intoxicated.

‘ By stealth and in silence we hastened on to my house ; where I found Adela, as you may suppose, in a state of agonised distress. But there was no time for words—not even of explanation. With two of my peons whom I could trust, we hastily collected some of our animals — horses and pack-mules. The latter we loaded with such things as we could think of, as being requisite for a journey. We intended it to be a long one—all the way across the great prairies. I knew there would be no safety for us within the limits of New Mexico; and I remembered what you had said to me but a few months before—your kind proffer of hospitality, should it ever be my fate to seek refuge in your country. And to seek it we set forth ; leaving my house untenanted, or only in charge of a few faithful domestics, from whom gold had gained a promise not to betray us. Don Prospero, my sister, and myself, the two trusted peons who had volunteered to accompany us, with the girl Conchita, composed our travelling party. I knew we dared not take the route usually travelled. We should be followed by Uraga’s troop, and taken

back or slain in the pursuit. Instead, I made direct for the mountains, with whose passes I was acquainted, having traversed them in pursuit of the Apaches.

‘We passed safely through the sierra, and kept on towards the Rio Pecos. Beyond this river all was unknown to us. We only knew that there lay the *Llano Estacado*, invested with mysterious terrors—the themes of our childhood’s fears—a vast sterile tract, uninhabited, or only by savages seeking scalps, by wild beasts ravening for blood, by hideous reptiles and serpents breathing poison. But what were all these dangers to that we were leaving behind? Nothing; and this thought inspired us to keep on.

‘We crossed the Pecos, and entered upon the desert tract. We knew not how far it extended; only that on the other side lay a fertile country, through which we might hope to reach the frontier settlements of your great free nation. It was the beacon of our hopes, the goal of our safety.

‘We kept a due easterly course; but there were days when the sun was obscured by clouds; and

then, unguided, we had either to remain at rest, or travel by guess-work.

‘ We toiled on, growing weak for want of food, and suffering terribly from thirst. No water was to be found anywhere, not a drop.

‘ Our animals suffered as ourselves. Staggering under the weight of their loads, one by one they gave out, falling down upon the desert plain. Only one held up bravely to the last—the mustang mare that brought you to our lone ranche. Yes, Lolita survived to carry my dear sister, as if she understood the value we all placed upon her precious burden. The others gave out—first the horses ridden by Don Prospero and myself, then the pack-mules. Fortunately they fell near the spot where we at length found relief—near enough for their loads to be afterwards recovered.

‘ One day, as we toiled on afoot, in the hourly expectation of death, we came in sight of this fair valley. It appeared to us a Paradise, as you say it did to yourself. Under our eyes were green trees, and the sheen of flowing waters; in our ears the songs of birds, we had never expected

to hear again. Chance had brought us direct to the path, the only one by which it can be reached from the upper plain. Inspired by the promising landscape below, we had still strength enough to descend. We drank of the sweet water, and soon found food on the branches of the trees that shaded it. It was in a season when there were fruits and berries in abundance. Afterwards we discovered game, and were successful in capturing it. With restored strength we were able to go back, and recover the paraphernalia we had left upon the plain, along with two of our mules, that, after resting, had regained their feet, and could struggle on a little farther.

‘At first we only thought of a temporary resting-place; though there seemed but slight hope of being able to continue our journey. But as the days passed on and we were left undisturbed, we began to realise the fact, that we had found a safe asylum.

‘It was not likely that any one could know the route we had followed in our flight; and even the vengeance of Uraga, would scarce pursue us over

the Staked Plain. In any case there was no help for it but to remain in the valley—the only alternative seeming to be, a return to the Del Norte—a thing not to be thought of. We resolved, therefore, on staying—at least for a time. We had conceived a plan for communicating with the outer settlements of New Mexico; and were not without hope, that sooner or later we might get news that would make it safe for us to return. In our country, as you know, there is nothing permanent, and we might expect ere long to see the liberal party—our own—once more in power.

‘ Our resolution to remain here becoming fixed, we set about making our situation as comfortable as circumstances would permit. We built this humble dwelling whose roof now shelters you. We turned fishermen and hunters; in this last speciality my sister becoming more skilled than any of us—a real huntress, as you, señor, have had occasion to perceive. We have enjoyed the life amazingly; more especially our worthy medico, who is an enthusiastic naturalist, and here finds full scope for his studies. But we have not de-

pended altogether upon the chase for our subsistence. Manuel, one of our peons, makes an occasional trip to the settlements—the route to which he had such reason to remember. He takes care to steer clear of Albuquerque, as also to make his approaches under cover of the night, and his marketing with circumspection. With our gold not yet exhausted, he was enabled to purchase mules, and bring back such commodities as we stand in need of; while a friend, who is intrusted with the secret of our hiding-place, keeps us informed of the *novedades*. Now, Don Francisco, you know all.'





CHAPTER XXV.

THE INTERCEPTED LETTER.

For some moments the Mexican colonel remained silent, apparently buried in a profound reflection.

‘By the way, Don Francisco,’ he said at length, ‘you say you sent me a letter by the spring caravans; which never reached me. What were its contents?’

‘O, that letter! Merely to say that I was coming back to New Mexico, and hoped to find you in good health.’

‘Did it particularise the time you expected to arrive at Albuquerque, or elsewhere?’

‘Yes; as far as I could fix it, I think it did.’

‘The route by which you intended to travel?’

‘That too. I said I intended to make trial

of a new trail lately discovered; up the Canadian, and skirting the northern end of the Staked Plain. An unfortunate speculation, as it has turned out.'

Perhaps, had Adela Miranda been taking part in the conversation, 'Don Francisco' would not have made the last remark. Nor on reflection, and in secret thought, did he indorse it. She was not present; only her brother, his two guests Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder, with the old doctor Don Prospero. The two last had just come in, and, at the invitation of the host, joined him in a glass of the Paso wine.

'Why do you ask, Colonel Miranda?'

The question was the continued speech of the young Kentuckian, who, as well as the other two, had noticed that their host was unusually meditative.

'Because,' said Miranda, 'I've been thinking a good deal about the attack on your caravan. The more I reflect upon it, the more am I led to suspect that there were *painted* Indians in the party that plundered you.'

‘They appeared to be all painted,’ was the simple rejoinder of the young prairie merchant.

‘That isn’t what I mean, Don Francisco.’

‘This chile knows what ye mean,’ interposed Wilder, starting up excitedly from his chair, as the Mexican made the remark. ‘That’s been my suspeeshun all along. You know what I tolt ye, Frank?’

Hamersley looked interrogatively, as also did Don Prospero.

‘Did not I say that I seed two men ’mong the Injuns wi’ ha’r upon thar faces? They wa’n’t Injuns; they war whites. Ain’t that what ye mean, Kurnel?’

‘*Precisamente*,’ was the colonel’s reply.

All waited for him again to speak, giving the explanation Wilder already half guessed at—the doctor more than half. Even the Kentuckian, less experienced in Mexican ways and wickedness—in infamy so incredible—began to have a glimmering of the truth.

Seemingly weighing his words, Miranda said :

‘No doubt it was a band of Comanches who

attacked and destroyed your caravan, and killed your comrades. But I have as little doubt, that there was a white man among them—one at least—who planned and instigated the deed.'

'Who, Colonel Miranda?' was the quick interrogatory of the Kentuckian; who spoke first, being the only one of the party who now needed explanation. Nor did he much need it; for the name pronounced by Miranda was on the point of his own tongue.

It was again 'Uraga.'

'Yes,' said the refugee colonel; 'Gil Uraga is undoubtedly the robber who has despoiled you; though it was done in the guise of an Indian attack, and with real Indians as his assistants. I see it all now, clear as sunlight. He got your letter, addressed to me as colonel commanding the district of Albuquerque. As a matter of course, he opened it. It told him when and where to meet you, your strength, the value of your cargo—everything. The last was not needed as an incentive for Gil Uraga to attack *you*, Don Francisco; the scar you left upon his cheek was

sufficient. Didn't I tell you at the time, he would move heaven and earth to be revenged upon both of us? He has striven well, and behold his success! I a hunted refugee, robbed of everything; you almost the same: both of us ruined men!

'Not yet!' exclaimed the Kentuckian, springing to his feet, as if the juice of the Paseño grapes had got into his head; 'not ruined yet, Colonel Miranda! If it be as you say, I shall follow this fiend, if needed, into the very heart of Mexico; I shall follow and get my own out of him.'

'Thar's one'll go wi' ye!' cried Walt Wilder, with unusual rapidity unfolding his gigantic form. 'Yis, Frank, to the heart o' Mexiko, plum-centre; to thet air place I've heern so much talked o'—the halls o' the Moctyzoomas. Hyar's a goodish-size chile reddy for the start!'

'If,' said Hamersley, his coolness coming back as he saw the more irrational enthusiasm of his comrade, 'if, Colonel Miranda, it should turn out as you have conjectured, surely there is law in your land—not much I suspect—but enough to get redress for an outrage like that?'

‘My dear Don Francisco,’ replied the Mexican ex-colonel, quietly rolling a fresh cigarito between his fingers, ‘there is law for those who have the power and money to obtain it. In New Mexico, as you must yourself know, *might* makes *right*; and never more than at the present hour. Don Manuel Armigo is once more the governor of my unfortunate fatherland. When I tell you that he rose to his present position by just such an act as that which has despoiled you, you may then understand the sort of law administered in New Mexico. Manuel Armigo was a shepherd, employed on one occasion to drive a flock of thirty thousand sheep—the property of his masters, the Señor Leno and Chavez—to the northern markets of Chihuahua. While crossing the Jornada del Murete, he and one or two confederates, whom he had instructed in his plan, disguised themselves as Apache Indians, attacked their fellow sheep-drivers, murdered them, and made themselves masters of the whole flock. Then, pulling the plumes from their heads, and washing the paint off their faces, they drove their charge to a dif-

ferent market, sold them, and returned to Leno and Chavez, to tell a tale of Indian spoliation, and how they themselves had escaped with their scalps still safe! This is the true history of General Don Manuel Armigo, governor of New Mexico—at least, that of his first beginnings. With such, and many similar deeds done by him since, is it likely he would look with any other than a lenient eye on the doings of Gil Uraga, his pet and protégé? No, Don Francisco; not even if you could prove the present colonel-commandante of Albuquerque, in full open court, to have been the man who robbed yourself, and butchered your companions.'

'I shall try, for all that,' said Hamersley, his heart half in sorrow at the remembrance of his slaughtered comrades, and half bursting with the bitterness of a vengeance obstructed. 'Don't suppose, Colonel Miranda, that I intend resting my cause on the clemency of Don Manuel Armigo, or any doubtful justice to be expected at his hands. There's a wide stretch of prairie between the United States and New Mexico, but not

so wide as to hinder our American eagle from flapping its wings across it, and giving protection to all of us who stray this way; even to a poor prairie trader. A thousand thanks, my dear Don Valerian—I owe you far more—for twice saving my life, and now for setting me on the true track of the scoundrel who has twice endangered it. Parting from your hospitality, I shall go in search of him—direct to the valley of the Del Norte. If I find our man there, and discover that we are not wronging him by our conjectures, don't fear that I shall fail in obtaining justice, whatever Don Manuel Armigo may do to defeat it.'

'More'n justice!' added the hunter-guide, again springing from his seat with a violent gesticulation. 'Only think o' fourteen innercent men—airy one o' 'em brave as lions—attacked 'ithout word o' warnin', shot down, slaughtered, an' sculped, 'mong the tongues an' wheels o' wagons! Think o' that, an' then don't talk about justice—talk only o' reevege!'



CHAPTER XXVI.

RETURNING FROM A RAID.

AN Indian encampment. It is upon a creek called 'Pecan,' a confluent of the Little Wichita river, heading about a hundred miles from the eastern edge of the Llano Estacado.

There are no tents in the encampment—not even a tent-pole; only here and there a buffalo-robe, extended horizontally upon upright sticks—branches that have been cut from the pecans. Here and there the umbrageous canopy of the trees protect the encamped warriors from the fervid rays of a noonday sun, striking vertically down.

That they are *warriors* is evidenced by the absence of tents. A peaceful party, in its ordinary

nomadic passage across the prairies, would have its lodges along with it—grand conical structures of dressed buffalo-skins—with the squaws that set them up, and the dogs or ponies that transported them to the spot.

In this encampment on the Pecan are neither squaws, dogs, nor ponies; only men, naked to the breech-clout, their bodies brightly painted from hip to head, chequered like hatchments, or the tight-fitting jacket of a stage harlequin; some showing devices fantastic, even ludicrous; others of aspect terrible—such as the death's-head and cross-bones.

An old prairie man, on seeing them, would have at once said: '*Injuns on the war-trail.*'

It did not need this sort of experience to tell they were returning from it. If there were no ponies or dogs around the encampment, there were other animals in abundance—horses, mules, and horned cattle; horses and mules of American breed, and cattle whose ancestral stock had come from Tennessee or Kentucky, along with the early colonists of Texas.

If there were no squaws or papooses, there were women and children—both white. A group of them could be seen near the centre of the encampment. It did not need their dishevelled hair and torn dresses to show they were captives; nor yet the half-dozen savages, spear-armed, keeping guard over them. Their drooping heads and despairing faces were evidence sufficient of the melancholy situation.

What were these captives, and who were their captors? Two questions easily answered. In a general way, the picture explained itself. The first were the wives and children, with sisters and grown-up daughters among them, of Texan colonists, from a settlement near the frontier—too near to protect itself from an Indian maraud. It was one pressed far forward into the fertile tract of land lying among the *Cross Timbers*. The marauders were a party of Comanches, with whom the reader has made some acquaintance; for they were no other than the band of the Horned Lizard. The time is several weeks subsequent to the tragical scene of the caravan capture, already

described; and, judging from the spectacle now before us, we may conclude that the Tenawa chief has not spent the interval in idleness. At least two hundred miles lie between the northern point of the Staked Plain, where the caravan was destroyed, and the Cross Timbers. Yet twenty more to the place of the despoiled settlement, whose spoil, in horses, horned cattle, and captives, now make such an imposing appearance in the Indian camp.

Such quick work requires some explanation: it is a double *coup*, at variance with the customs and inclinations of the prairie freebooter, who, having acquired a booty, rarely attempts another effort till its proceeds have been squandered. He is like the *anaconda*, that, having gorged itself, lies torpid, till the craving of a new hunger once more arouses it to activity.

Thus would it have been with the Horned Lizard and his band, but for a circumstance of a somewhat unusual kind. The attack on the prairie traders was not designed by himself, but was a scheme of his secret ally, the military

commandant of Albuquerque. The summons had come to him unexpected, and after he had planned his descent on the Texan settlement. But, sanguinary as that act was, it had been brief, leaving him time to carry out his original design, which had also proved as tragical in its execution. Here and there, a spear standing up, with a tuft of light-coloured hair, blood-clotted, upon its blade, was evidence of this. Quite as successful too. The large drove of horses, mules, and cattle—to say nothing of that group of wan woe-struck captives—proved the spoil of the maraud worth as much, or perhaps more, than that taken from the trader's wagons.

The Horned Lizard was jubilant, as well as every warrior of his band. In loss their late-made spoil had cost them little—only one or two of their number, killed by the settlers while defending themselves. It made up for the severe sacrifice sustained in their attack upon the caravan. If the number of their tribe was reduced, there were now the fewer to share with; and what with the cotton goods of Lowell, the gaudy prints of

Manchester; the stripes, stroudings, and scarlet cloths to bedeck and array them; the hand-mirrors in which to admire themselves; the horses to ride upon; the mules to carry their tents; the cattle to eat; the white women to be their concubines, and the children their attendants—all these were fine prospects for savages, sufficient to make them jubilant—almost delirious with joy.

A new era had dawned upon the tribe of which the Horned Lizard was chief. Hitherto it had been a somewhat starving community, its range lying amid sterile tracts, on the upper tributaries of the Red River and Canadian. Now, before it was a time of feasting and luxury, such as rarely occurs to a robber-band, whether amidst the forest-clad mountains of Italy, or on the treeless steppes of America.

The Comanche chief was joyous and triumphant. So also was his second in command; whose skin, with the paint cleansed from it, would have shown nearly white. He was, in truth, a Mexican, in early life taken captive by the Comanches, and long since matriculated into the mysteries of

the tribe; now one of its warriors, cunning and cruel as the Horned Lizard himself. It was he who had first put the Tenawa chief *en rapport* with the ruffian Uraga.

As the two stood together contemplating the captives, scanning the features of the younger women, the sensuous expression on their faces was hideous to behold. It would have been a painful sight for father, brother, or husband. And there were fathers, brothers, and husbands near—almost within sight. An eye elevated six hundred feet above the plain—that of a soaring eagle—would have seen them.

There *were* birds above—not eagles, but vultures; for the foul buzzards frequently follow the redskin on his maraud. Their instinct tells them that his path will be stained with blood, and strewn with corpses. There was a flock of these birds hovering in the heavens above. Also another flock not far off; though too far to attract the observation of the Indians. Now and then between the two a straggler might have been seen passing, as if a courier carrying despatches.

The vultures of the second flock were also hovering above an encampment. But very different was the appearance of the personages composing it. They were all men—not a woman or child among them—bearded men, with white skins, and wearing the garb of civilisation. Not of the most select kind or cut, nor all in the exact dress of civilised life; for among them were many whose buckskin hunting-shirts, fringed leggings, and moccasined feet showed equally the costume of the savage. Besides these there were men in blanket-coats of red, and green, and blue, all sweat-stained and dust-tarnished, till the colours nearly corresponded. Others in frocks of blue-gray Kentucky jeans, or the good old copper-coloured homespun. Still others in the sky-blue cottonade, product of the hand-mills of Attakapas. Boots and brogans of all kinds of leather, stained and unstained; even that tanned from the skin of the alligator. Hats of every shape, fashion, size, and material—straw, chip, Panama, wool, felt, and even the silk bell-topper, bad imitation of beaver—all looking worse for wear.

In one thing these personages were nearly alike—their arms and equipment. All were belted, pouched, and powder-horned; a bowie-knife, with a revolving-pistol in the belt—some with two—and each carrying a rifle in his hand. Besides this uniformity, there were still other resemblances, at least among a portion of them. It was noticeable in their rifles, which were jägers of the army-branded pattern; still more apparent in the caparison of their horses; these carrying cavalry-saddles, the peaks and cantles mounted with brass. Among these there was a sort of uncouth half-military discipline, indicated by some slight deference shown to two or three of their number, who appeared to be officers. They were, in fact, a troop, or, as among themselves styled, a company of ‘Texan Rangers.’

Not all in the encampment were of this organisation—only about half. The other half were the fathers, brothers, and husbands, whom the Horned Lizard and his band had despoiled of their daughters, sisters, and wives. Like, or unlike to one another, they were still more unlike

to the crowd composing the encampment of the savages. The buzzards above seemed conscious of the distinction, and perhaps also understood its significance. Those same birds might have seen a similar sight before—almost certainly had they—and could foretell what was likely to follow from such a close proximity of adverse colours and antagonistic forms. There may have been an electricity in the air, that told the birds of what was to come—in the same way as they are forewarned of a storm.





CHAPTER XXVII.

A COUP.

I HAVE spoken of the party of Texans as forming an encampment. This is not correct; they were only *en bivouac*. Not even a stoppage so ceremonial as this; they were but halted to breathe and water their horses, snatching meanwhile a scrap from their haversacks—this last not leisurely. There were men among them that could not brook delay—men with hearts to whom every hour seemed a day, every lost minute torture. These were they, whose homes had been rendered desolate.

Their associates, the Rangers, were almost equally impatient of detention. They had now struck the trail of their life-long enemies; and not only the younger, but the elders of them—

like old hounds upon a deer-track—were to be held back by no leash, until they had buried their bowies in blood.

They knew whom they were in pursuit of—the Horned Lizard and his band. Many of the Rangers had an old score to settle with the Tena-wa chief—a balance of bloody retaliation. They were in hopes that the time was at hand.

‘They can’t be fur off now, cap’n,’ said a thin little man, all over buckskin, without tag or ornament, and who looked as if he had been at least half a century upon the plains. ‘I kin tell by the sign, thet they passed this hyur peint jest a hour arter sun-up.’

‘You are sure of that, Cully?’ asked the individual spoken to, who was the captain of the Rangers.

‘Sure as ef I’d been hyur an’ seed ’em. This hottish spell o’ sun air boun’ to bring ’em to a halt—specially as they’re cummered wi’ the stock an’ keptyves. I reck’n I kin tell the ’dzact spot whar they’ll make stop.’

‘Where?’

‘Pee-cawn Crik. Thur they’ll git sweet water an’ shade. Sartint they’ll stop thur, an’ maybe stay a spell. The skunks won’t hev neery idee thet we’re arter ’em, so fur from the settlements.’

‘If they’re upon the Pecan,’ interrupted a third speaker, a tall lathy individual, in a green blanket coat badly faded, ‘and anywhere near its mouth, we can’t be more than five miles from them. I know this part of the country well; I passed through it along with the Santa Fé expedition.’

‘Only five miles!’ exclaimed another man, whose dress bespoke a planter of respectability, while his sad countenance proclaimed him to be one of the bereaved. ‘O gentlemen! our horses are now rested; why not ride forward, and attack them at once?’

‘We’d be durned foolich to do so,’ replied the septagenarian in buckskin. ‘Thet, Mr. Wilton, ’ud be jess the way to defeet all our plans an’ purpisses. They’d see us long afore we ked git sight o’ them; time enuf to toat off the hosses an’ cattle—leaswise the weemen.’

‘What’s your way, Cully?’ asked one of the Rangers.

‘Wait till the sun go down, then ’proach ’em. Thar boun’ to hev fires, an’ thet’ll guide us right on to thar camp. Ef it’s in Pee-cawn bottom—as I’m sartint it air—we kin surround ’em eezy. Thar’s bluffs a-both sides, an’ we kin divide inter two lots; one stealin’ roun’ an’ comin’ from up the crik, whiles the tother ’tacks ’em from below. That way we’ll make sure o’ keepin’ ’em from runnin’ off the weemen; beside, it air the more likelier chance to count sculps.’

‘What do you say, boys?’ interrogated the Ranger captain, addressing himself more especially to the men composing his command.

‘Cully’s right,’ was the response spoken by a majority of voices.

‘Then we must stay here till night. If we go forward now, they may see us before we get within shooting distance. Do you think, Cully, you can take up the trail at night, supposing it be a dark one?’

‘Pish!’ retorted the guide, for Cully was act-

ing in this capacity. 'Take up the trail! Yes, in the blackest night as ever shet down over a puraira. Durn me! I ked smell it!'

There was no farther discussion. Cully's opinion was all-powerful, and determined the course of action. The halt, at first only intended to be temporary, was continued till the going down of the sun, despite expostulations, almost prayerful appeals, on the part of some of the men—the settlers who had left their desolate homes behind them, and who were burning with impatience once more to embrace the dear ones whose absence rendered them desolate.

* * * * *

Before another sun went down—even before it had fairly risen—they were one and all blessing the man who had given counsel in contradiction to their own. It was as the guide had predicted. The Indian despoilers had made halt on Pecan Creek; and, no longer fearing pursuit, tarried all night in their encampment. They had kindled large fires; and roasting upon these the fattest of the captured kine, spent the fore part of the

night in a grand Homeric feast. Engrossed with their joys, they had neglected guard; and in the midst of their savage festivities, they were suddenly set upon from all sides, the sharp cracking of the rifle, and the quick detonation of the revolver, silencing their wild cachinnation, and scattering them like chaff. After the first fusillade there was but little left of them. Those who were not instantly shot down escaped in the darkness, skulking off among the pecan trees. It was altogether an affair of firearms; and for once the bowie—the Texan's trusted weapon—had no part in the fray.

The first rays of the sun shed their light upon a strange scene—a tableau sanguinary, and yet not altogether sad. On the contrary, it disclosed a sight that, but for the red surroundings, might have seemed all of gladness. Fathers, half frantic with joy, embracing children they had never expected to see again; brothers clasping the hands of sisters, supposed lost for ever; husbands, late broken-hearted, once more made happy by the restoration of their wives!

This was the pleasant side of the picture. Close by, was presented that of less cheerful aspect; corpses strewed over the ground, still bleeding, scarce yet stark or stiff. All of coppery complexion—all Indians. Among them was recognised by Cully—and others of the Rangers his ancient enemies—the body of the Horned Lizard. Only one captive was taken alive; and he, because having a white skin, had done what was disdained by his red-skinned associates—begged for his life.

A tableau at once terrible and pleasing—a contrast of passions and emotions, such as can only be encountered on the far frontier of Texas.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FORCED CONFESSION.

THE Texan party had made what prairie men call a *coup*. On counting the corpses of their slain enemies, they found that at least one half of the Tenawa band had fallen, including its chief. They could make an approximate estimate of the number that had been opposed to them by the *sign* visible around the camp, as also by the trail they had been for several days following. Those who escaped had got off, some on their horses, hastily caught and mounted; others afoot, by taking to the timber. They were not pursued, as it was still dark night when the action ended; and by daylight these wild centaurs, well acquainted with the country, would be scattered beyond all chance of being overtaken.

The settlers were satisfied at having recovered their relatives, as well as their stolen stock; and for the Rangers, enough had been accomplished to slake their vengeful thirst—for the time. These last, however, had not come off unscathed; for the Comanches, well armed with guns, bows, and lances, had not died unresistingly. In Texas, Indians rarely do; and never when they know that it is a fight with Rangers. Between them and these frontier *guerrilleros*, in one sense as much savages as themselves, it is an understood thing: war to the bitter end, and no quarter either asked or granted. The Texan loss was three of their number killed, and about twice as many wounded—enough, considering the advantage they had had in their unwarned attack upon an enemy that had proved for once unwatchful.

When the conflict was ended, and daylight had made manifest the result, the victors took possession of the spoils—most being their own property. The cattle and horses, that had strayed or stampeded during the fight, were again collected into a drove—those of the Indians being united to it.

This done, only a short stay was intended—just long enough to bury the bodies of the three Rangers who had been killed, get stretchers prepared for such of the wounded as were unable to sit in the saddle, and make other preparations for taking the back-track towards the settlements.

They were not hastening their return through any apprehension of a counter-attack on the part of the Comanches. Fifty Texas Rangers—and there were this number in the party—have no fear on any part of the plains, so long as they are mounted on good horses, carrying rifles in their hands, bowie knives and pistols in their belts, a sufficient supply of powder in their flasks, and bullets in their pouches. With all these things they were amply provided; and had there been any necessity for continuing the pursuit, or the prospect of striking another *coup*, they would have gone on—even though the chase should conduct them into the defiles of the Rocky Mountains. To pursue and slay the savage was their vocation, their duty, their desire.

But the settlers were desirous of returning to

their homes, that they might relieve the anxiety of other dear ones, who there awaited them. Glad tidings they could carry.

While the preparations for departure were going on, Cully, who, with several others, was collecting the weapons and accoutrements found upon their slain enemies, gave utterance to a cry, that brought a crowd of his comrades around him.

‘What is it, Nat?’ inquired the Ranger captain.

‘Look hyur, cap! D’ye see this gun?’

‘Yes; a hunter’s rifle. Whose is it?’

‘That’s jess the questyin; though thar ain’t no questyin about it. Boys, do any o’ ye reconnise this hyur shootin’ iron?’

One after another the Rangers stepped up, and looked at the rifle.

‘I do,’ said one.

‘And I,’ added another.

And a third, and fourth, all made the affirmation in a tone of surprise.

‘Walt Wilder’s gun,’ continued Cully, ‘sure an’ sartin. I know it, an’ oughter know it. See

them two letters in the stock thar—"W. W." Ole Nat Cully hez good reezun to reconnise them, since 'twas hisself that cut 'em. I did it for Walt two yeern ago, when we war scoutin' on the Collyrado. It's his weepun, an' no mistake.'

'Where did you find it?' inquired the captain.

'I've jess tuk it out o' the claws o' the ugliest Injun as iver made trail on a puraria—that beauty thar, whose karkidge the buzzarts won't be likely to tech.'

As he spoke, Cully pointed to a corpse. It was that of the Tenawa chief, already recognised among the slain.

'He must a' hed it in his clutch when suddenly shot down,' Cully went on. 'An' whar did he git it? Boys, our ole kummarade's wiped-out for sartin. I know how Walt loved thet thur weepun. He w'udn't a parted wi' it unless along wi' his life.'

This was the conviction of several others who knew Walt Wilder. It was the company of Rangers to which he had formerly belonged.

'Thar's been foul play somewhar,' pursued

Cully. 'Walt went back to the States—to Kaintuck, ef this chile ain't mistook. But 'tain't likely he stayed thur; he kedn't keep long off o' the purarias. I tell ye, boys, these hyur Injuns hev been makin' mischief somewhar. Look thur—look at thar leggin's! Thar's no eend o' white sculps, an' fresh tuk too!'

The eyes of all were turned towards these terrible trophies, that in gory garniture fringed the buckskin leg-wear of the savages. Cully, with several others who had known Wilder well, proceeded to examine them, in full expectation that they would find among them the skin of their old comrade's head. There were seven scalps, all of white men, among many that were Indian, and not a few that exhibited the equally black, but shorter, crop of the Mexican. Those that were indubitably of white men showed the evidence of having been recently taken; but none could be identified as that of Walt Wilder. There was some relief in this: for his old comrades loved Walt. Still, there was his gun, which Cully declared could only be taken from him along with

his life. How had it come into the hands of the Horned Lizard?

‘I reckon we can settle that,’ said the captain of the Rangers. ‘The renegade ought to know something about it.’

This speech referred to the Mexican who had been taken prisoner, and about whose disposal they had already commenced to deliberate. Some were for shooting him on the spot; others proposed hanging; while only a few of the more humane advocated taking him on to the settlements, and there giving him a trial. He would have to die anyhow—that was pretty sure; for not only as a Mexican was he their enemy, but now doubly so, from being found in league with their most hated foemen—the Comanches.

The wretch was lying on the ground close by, shaking with fear, in spite of the fastenings in which he was tightly held. He knew he was in danger, and had only so far escaped, by having surrendered to a settler instead of one of the Rangers.

‘Let’s gie him a chance o’ his life—ef he’ll

tell all about it,' counselled Cully. 'What d'ye say, cap?'

'I agree to that,' answered the Ranger captain. 'He don't appear to be worth shooting; though it may be as well to take him back to the settlement, and shut him up in prison. The promise of his life may get out of him all he knows; if not, the other will. He's not an Indian, and a bit of rope looped round his neck will no doubt loosen his tongue. Suppose ye try it, boys?'

The 'boys' were unanimous in their assent, and the renegade was at once brought up for examination. The man in the green-blanket coat, who, as a Santa Fé expeditioner, had spent over twelve months in Mexican prisons, was appointed his examiner. He had been long enough among the 'yeller-bellies' to learn their language.

The renegade was for a time reticent, and his statements contradictory. No wonder he hesitated to tell what he knew, so compromising to himself. But when the lariat was at length noosed around his neck—the loose end of it thrown over the limb of a pecan tree—the other conditions being

at the same time made known to him—he saw that things could be no worse; and, seeing this, he made confession—full, if not free. Everything was disclosed that had occurred—the attack and capture of the caravan; the slaughter of the white men that accompanied it; and the retreat of two of them to the cliff, one of whom, by the description, could be no other than Walt Wilder. When the renegade came to describe the horrible mode in which their old comrade had perished, the Rangers were almost frenzied with rage; and it was with difficulty some of them could be withheld from forswearing their promise, and tearing the wretch to pieces.

He declared, however, that he had taken no part in the transaction; that none of his acts were voluntary; that, although they had found him among the Indians, he was there only as their prisoner; and that they had forced him along with them.

This was evidently untrue; but, false or true, it had the effect of pacifying his judges, so that the lariat was left loose around his neck.

Farther examination and cross-examination elicited everything, except the alliance between the Mexican *militarios* and the despoilers of the caravan. Not thinking of this—indeed having no suspicion of it—his examiners did not put any questions about it; and the wretch, therefore, saw no reason to declare it. He might have indulged the hope of one day returning to the Del Norte, and holding further communication with Colonel Uraga.

‘Boys!’ said the ranger-captain to his men, as soon as the examination was over, ‘you all of you loved Walt Wilder—all of you who knew him?’

‘We did! we did!’ was the response feelingly spoken.

‘So did I. Well; he’s dead beyond a doubt. It’s more than a month ago, and he could not last that long, shut up in a cave. His bones will be there, no doubt, with those of the poor fellow, whoever he was, that went in with him. It’s dreadful to think of it. Now, from what the Mexican says, it can’t be so very far from here;

and as we can make him guide us to the place, I propose we go there, get out the bones of our old comrade, and give them burial.'

With the Texan Rangers, obedience to duty is less a thing of command than request: and this was a request that received an instant and unanimous assent.

'Let us go!' was the cry that came from all sides.

'We needn't all make this journey,' continued the captain. 'There's no need for any more than our boys, the Rangers, and such of the settlers as may choose to go with us. The rest, who have got to take care of the women, and some for driving back the stock, can make their way to the Cross Timbers at once. I reckon we've left the track pretty clear of Indians, and they will be in no danger.'

Without farther discussion this arrangement was decided upon; and the two parties commenced making the preparations suitable to their respective plans.

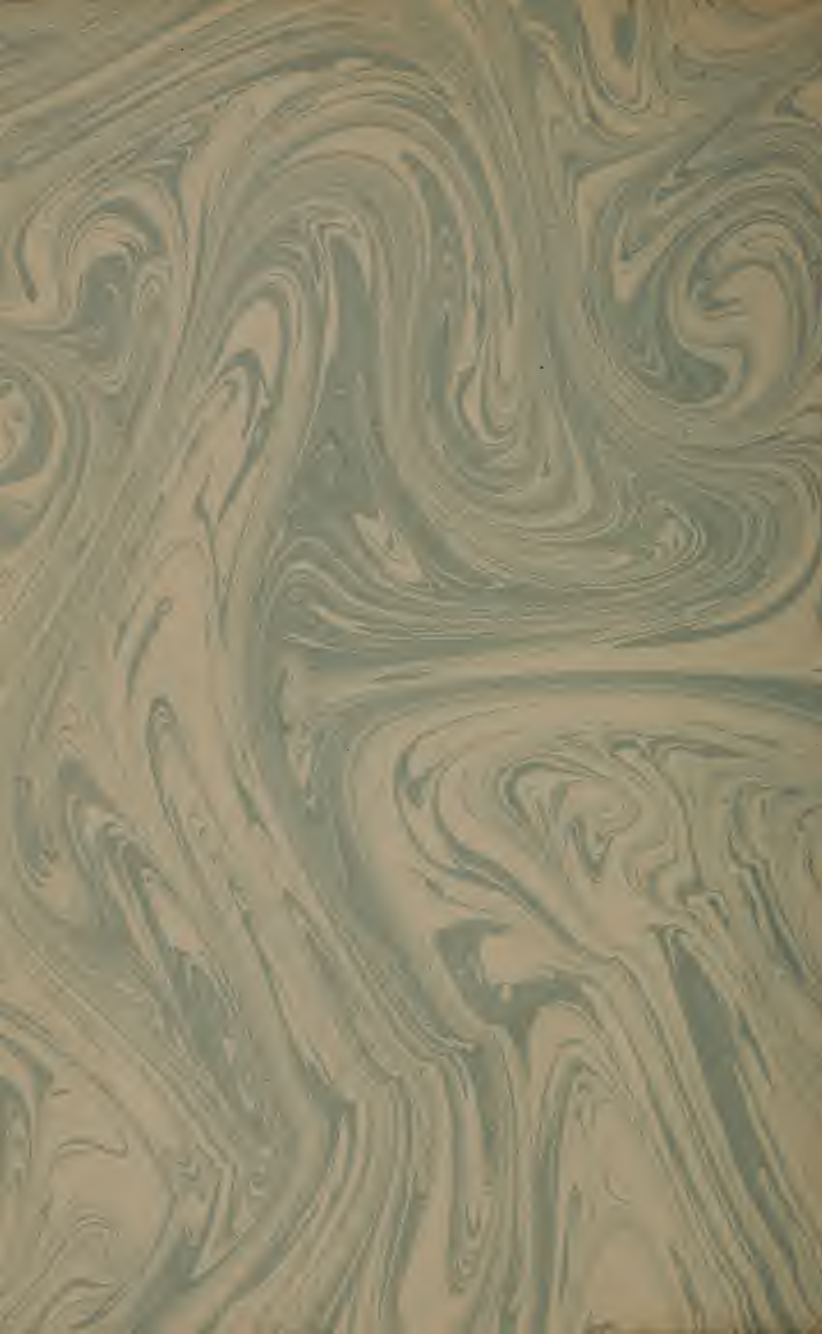
In less than two hours after, they had separ-

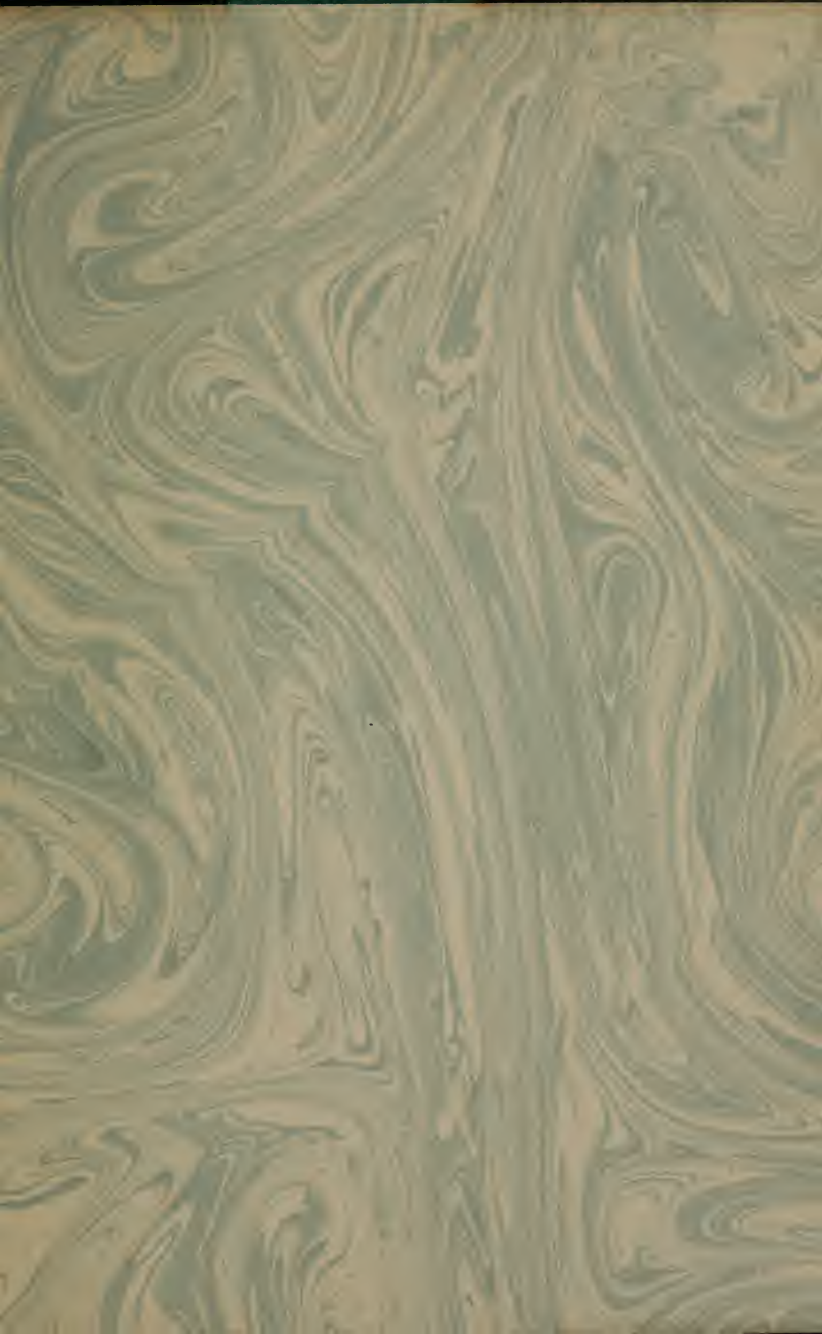
ated ; the settlers, with the women, children, and cattle, wending their way eastward ; while the Rangers, guided by the renegade, rode off in the opposite direction—toward the Llano Estacado.

END OF VOL. I.

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